

This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

HN 1HI3 -



BROWN OF LOST RIVER

ID14752

Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine

Digitized by Google

484

Chamisso

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Appletons'
Town and Country
Library

No. 288

BROWN OF LOST RIVER

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

BROWN OF LOST RIVER

A STORY OF THE WEST

BY

MARY E. STICKNEY



NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1900

Digitized by Google

KD 14752

HARVARD
COLLEGE
LIBRARY

COPYRIGHT, 1900,
BY D. APPLETON AND COMPANY.

All rights reserved.

Digitized by Google

IN MEMORY OF A CERTAIN DAY OF WANDERING

ACROSS THE WYOMING PLAINS,

THIS STORY IS DEDICATED

TO

FRANK.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

BROWN OF LOST RIVER

CHAPTER I

WITH an air of brusque impatience, as though it had been minded to pass by a spot of earth so insignificant, the long overland train halted before the tiny box of a station that introduced the travelling world to Hereford City. A few pieces of baggage and express matter were shot out upon the platform, while from the last Pullman, so far in the rear as to seem altogether outside the corporate limits of the place, a passenger was assisted to the ground with a gallant care on the part of conductor and porter which told to all observers that the lady was young and fair even before her features had been fully revealed. Then, with blatant grumbling, as though wholly exasperated at so much good time wasted, the heavy train strained onward toward the glowing West, and Hereford City was left to a desolation that seemed akin to shipwreck.

Digitized by Google

Edith Ellery stood for a moment motionless on the bare, weather-beaten platform, expectantly glancing around the assembled faces, her gaze rather blankly straying then to the frame section house across the way—like the station, neatly painted in that dark red-brown beloved of the Union Pacific Railroad—surprisedly considering the untidy array of sheds and corrals littering the foreground, the huge water tank on the other side, with the engine house squatting in its shadow, from the door of which the blue-shirted engineer returned her glance with meditative interest. These, with a few empty cattle cars on a side track, appeared to comprise all that man had been able to do for Hereford City.

As she looked, there grew up within her an annoyed consciousness that she had become an object of quite intense interest to all the small community. A slatternly woman appeared in the open doorway of the section house, unceremoniously brushing the children aside while she usurped their place on the step; a couple of men who had been lounging in the rear of the cow sheds strolled heavily nearer; the alert young station agent plainly had one eye upon her while delivering some express matter to a man of cowboy type, whose interest also betrayed itself in covert glances; while a mangy

Digitized by Google

dog, having the advantage over his human competitors in freedom from conventional restraint, was sniffing about her gown with sanguine demonstrations of friendliness.

Her first glance developed an expression of disappointment, fast deepening into something like consternation, as she grasped the limitations of this place in which she found herself to all intents alone, the June twilight filled with chill whispers of the night so near at hand. But Edith Ellery was not given to nervous tremors, and although she felt her heart sinking within her, she still wore a sturdy little air of self-reliance as she made her way toward the observant gentleman in the official cap.

"I was expecting the Ellery carriage to meet me—from the K 6 ranch, you know," she said, with a questioning inflection, a certain note sounding through the polished sweetness of her voice telling that she had been schooled to expect all possible deference as no less than her due.

"They don't appear to be here," the young man rather superfluously observed, pulling nervously at the gingham cuffs drawn up over his shirt sleeves, while his glance turned to a buckboard waiting at a little distance. "Oh, I say, Brown," he called out—whereat the young man of cowboy aspect, who had started toward the

Digitized by Google

team with a box balanced on one shoulder, turned back inquiringly—"know if the Ellery outfit is likely to be along?"

"We haven't seen anything of them at our place." The answer was addressed to the young lady with a friendly smile. "They usually get down about noon, too, when they come."

"But I telegraphed the day before yesterday," she protested, with a woman's unconscious trick of seeming to hold all men at once accountable for her mishaps. "Surely the message must have reached them."

"Probably you wired by way of Cheyenne," the agent suggested, his tone deprecating.

"Certainly. That was the direction they gave me."

"But a wire must go by mail from Cheyenne to—Big Cow Creek, isn't it? Just so. And the mails in this part of the country aren't like death and taxes for certainty. Probably the message got laid over somewhere. Your friends may get it to-day, and be along to-morrow all right."

"But, meanwhile, what am I to do? Is there a train by which I can get to Cheyenne to-night?"

"None but the freight at 11.30, and that wouldn't be pleasant for you, even if they were

Digitized by Google

allowed to carry passengers, which they aren't," the agent explained, his face clouded over with kindly concern.

"Then, can I get a team to take me to K 6 ranch?"

"They might send somebody over with you from Cameron's," brightening at this possible solution of the difficulty. "How would that be, Brown?"

"I guess we can manage it," smilingly answered the one addressed, who had returned from the buckboard with evident desire to assist if he might. "We can take you over in the morning perfectly well, if the Ellerys don't put in an appearance."

"In the morning!" she exclaimed, with frank dissatisfaction. "But why not to-night?"

"Mainly because it is thirty odd miles, and rather a blind trail even by daylight. It is half past seven now; it would be fully an hour later before we could get started from Cameron's, and the night will be dark. I should not like to undertake it, knowing the road as little as I do, while I'm sure there is nobody at our place any better posted about it."

"There seems to be no hotel," the girl ruefully observed, her glance straying over the unpromising array of buildings.

Digitized by Google

"But I can take you over to Cameron's," said the young man, with friendly eagerness. "Of course you couldn't think of stopping here."

"Indeed, no; you'll have to go over to Cameron's," put in the station agent decidedly. "You'll be all right over there; while here—well, you see how it is," glancing about, with a shrug amply expressive. "Mrs. Flannigan, over at the section house, has a lot of navvies boarding with her, besides having the place about knee-deep with kids. I bunk in the office and bach—rustle my own grub, you know. It's too bad; but really, as things are, I couldn't ask a cat to stay here."

A few minutes later the buckboard was rattling along its way toward a low line of hills that cut off the northern horizon at close range, Edith keeping an anxious eye on her belongings piled high in the rear, all of which she was secretly persuaded were in imminent danger of being jolted to the ground. They came to a gate in a wired fence presently, and, stopping the team, the young man alighted to open it.

"Shall I take the reins?" asked Miss Ellery, holding out her daintily gloved hands, her smile, if somewhat condescending, quite evidently meant to be friendly.

"If you would not mind," Brown answered,

Digitized by Google

returning the smile with interest. "And could you drive through the gate? The horses are perfectly gentle."

He was a handsome fellow when he smiled, Miss Ellery noted, as she drove by him; a brawny, blond giant, with even, white teeth gleaming under the heavy mustache that was a shade lighter than the close-cropped hair; with honest, laughing gray eyes that looked at one with a glance that was like a grasp of the hand in its cordial assurance of good will. He was clothed in the gray corduroy so popular among the cattlemen, the pantaloons tucked in the tops of a pair of high russet leather boots. His wide-brimmed, gray felt hat was turned up in front in the rakish cowboy fashion, while the red silk handkerchief carelessly knotted about his throat supplied the one bit of colour that seemed to make perfect the artistic harmony of the whole costume. It was a figure subtly to suit the bare western landscape, she thought, with a glance at the small leather-covered box telling of a taste for photography. If he had had but a couple of pistols and a bowie knife sticking in his belt, perhaps—with a distinct sense of relief in noting that he had not—and if, in a general way, he had looked rather more lawless and dangerous, he might have posed as an ideal type of the wild West. As it was, she would have been

Digitized by Google

glad if she might have turned the effective glance of that small black box upon him as he stood there, with lithe, unconscious grace, holding back the gate.

She flushed faintly as she caught his glance, suddenly conscious that, in the preoccupation of considering an interesting subject for the camera, her gaze had been prolonged to a degree which, even to the presumably dull perception of a cowboy, might seem rather to exceed the bounds of courtesy. "Is that all there is of it—Hereford City?" she asked, with ready effort to divert his attention, nodding back at the little huddle of buildings seeming almost lost upon the measureless expanse of the dun-coloured plains.

"It seems a good deal like giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name, doesn't it?" he laughed, as he resumed his place beside her.

There was a slight flash of surprise in Miss Ellery's averted eyes. Shakespeare on the lips of a cowboy seemed rather more incongruous than the lack of pistols and long hair.

"The name seems something of a misfit," she remarked, furtively measuring him with another glance.

"Well, rather. But, at the outset, I suppose there was a city here—on paper. These

Digitized by Google

places are generally planted out with no end of great expectations; only in this case, as in many another, the seed seems to have fallen upon stony ground."

"And how far is it to this place where we are going—Cameron's?" she asked, dubiously regarding the road ahead, which seemed to be leading away into an unbroken wilderness.

"Only about three miles, though I'm afraid it may seem to you longer," he said, with a deprecating smile. "There is a certain over-and-overishness about the landscape that seems to appreciably lengthen the miles, especially to a stranger. You will find it a tiresome trip, I'm afraid."

"Oh, no; it is delightful to be out in the air after the dusty, stuffy day in the cars." Insensibly her tone had grown more friendly. The refinement of his speech, his easy courtesy, indicating no smallest consciousness of any social distinction that might count to his disadvantage, all tended to deepen her impression that this could be no common cowboy. "And do you live there?" she asked, pursuing her own train of thought.

"At Cameron's? Oh, I am there off and on. I have a place of my own over on Lost River; not much of a place"—putting in the qualifying phrase with an apologetic smile, as

Digitized by Google

though fearful of seeming boastful—" but, such as it is, I live there when I am at home. I have been breaking horses at Cameron's."

" Oh," returned Miss Ellery, with a falling inflection. She was conscious of a vague sense of disappointment, coupled with a sort of unreasoning resentment, as if he had been guilty of wilful misrepresentation. Any distinction that might appear in her mind between a cowboy and a horse-breaker could only be in favour of the former. With methods of deduction wholly feminine, she lumped all persons having avowed connection with that scapegoat of race-track gambling, the horse, in one category of sporting characters, all more or less disreputable.

They were going at a brisk pace over a rolling country that seemed to have no limit, line upon line of faded greens and browns and grays merging into hazy blues and purples at the horizon line. No tree or shrub or distinct object of any sort broke the monotony; the scene as bare and starved of beauty as though God had forgotten this part of his world. But soon, passing through another gate, they came upon cattle innumerable, sleek, well-fed creatures, all raising their heads to stare with wild, shy eyes as the buckboard passed them noisily by.

" The cattle are looking well this year," the

Digitized by Google

young man observed after a little, with evident desire to make talk.

"Are they?" she indifferently returned; then, as though regretting the somewhat snubbing tone of the speech, she added, "I am afraid I am rather lacking in appreciation for cattle."

"Indeed!" his smiling glance asking for explanation. "Do you share the usual feminine prejudice against their horns?"

"Ah, they are objectionable in so many ways. They are so aggressively large, don't you know?" half laughing. In spite of herself, as it seemed, her manner would grow almost too friendly as she encountered the frank good will of his glance. "And then I can never get over the idea that, given sufficient provocation, they might bite."

"Bite!" he exclaimed, with a big, hearty laugh. "You have never been West before, I imagine."

"No; this is my first experience."

"And—perhaps the question has not grown quite stale yet—may I ask what you think of it up to date?"

"Well, there seems a good deal of it," looking away, with an elusive smile.

"In other words, you are not in love with the country."

Digitized by Google

"Oh, I don't believe in love at first sight under any circumstances."

"No—don't you?" regarding her rather fixedly, with a broad smile.

"And I have had so much to do to correct my preconceived ideas that I have hardly had time to analyze the new impressions."

"And in what particular has it disappointed you?"

"I did not say that it had disappointed me. It is only a little—different. For instance, these plains: I had imagined the plains a vast stretch of country lying perfectly flat."

"'Flat, stale, and unprofitable'—that is what a good many have found it all, I fancy." The shadow that flitted across his face hinted that he might have spoken out of his own experience. "But, of course you are not going to charge it up against the country because it is spiced with a little more variety than you had anticipated, if it only happens to be a few feet here and there in the matter of altitude."

"Oh, no; it is quite an improvement on my expectations in that respect. And the people—I had, somehow, looked for a rougher class than any I have seen," turning rather a sharp glance upon him. Perhaps, incidentally, this young man might be good enough to explain if he were to be taken as a fair type of the genus cowboy.

Digitized by Google

"Did you look for Indians in war paint, and cutthroats clothed as cowboys, to stand in the foreground of every landscape, firing guns and flourishing knives?" he laughed. "That is rather a common Eastern conception of the wild and woolly West, I believe. But you will discover, the sentiment in favour of dying with one's boots on is rather out of date in Wyoming; while it is not considered good form to snuff the candles with six-shooters in these days."

"That was hardly my idea," drawing herself up stiffly, a little ruffled at the chaffing tone.

"At all events, it is nice that we somewhat exceed your expectations. It is a great thing merely to come up to people's expectations, as a rule, to say nothing of going beyond"; adding with abrupt irrelevancy, as though of a sudden guessing that she was not quite pleased with the tone of careless joking, "By the way, from the top of the next rise we shall see Cameron's place—the house, that is; of course, all this land is a part of the ranch. He has thirty thousand acres under fence here."

"Are we there so soon?" she exclaimed, with frank surprise. "It has not seemed like three miles." There was a flash in the gray eyes that might have meant masculine vanity well pleased; and she hastened to add, her face warming with a sudden unreasoning flush,

Digitized by Google

"And is this place a sort of summer boarding house?"

"About as near an approach to that sort of thing as you will be likely to find in this part of the country," he replied, as though a good deal amused at the suggestion. "They don't hang out a sign, but they are always ready to take in whoever comes along, and offer the best they have."

"Mrs. Cameron—I suppose the lady of the ranch is Mrs. Cameron—must be a model housekeeper to be always prepared for company in a place where there appear to be no markets around the corner," the girl went on idly, merely to be saying something.

"Mrs. Cameron!" he repeated, with an air of surprise. "Oh, the family doesn't live here, you know. They make their headquarters at Cheyenne. Mr. Cameron is down off and on; but he doesn't happen to be here just now."

"Who does live here, then?" Miss Ellery indifferently demanded, staring ahead. It did not occur to her to feel any particular concern in the matter so long as it seemed clear that she was to be properly entertained.

"There is the place!" exclaimed the young man, not heeding the question, as he indicated with the whip a group of buildings scattered in dark silhouette in the valley below, where a

Digitized by Google

river's course was indicated by an irregular line of trees. "That is the house—the frame building with the red roof, near the windmill; the great sod house at the right was built when the ranch was first taken up, but it is only used for a barn now. The new house is not much to look at outside; but it is comfortable; and the part reserved for the family is even fitted up rather handsomely. Occasionally Mrs. Cameron comes down with a party of friends, for a hunt, or, perhaps, for the round-up; and the rooms are always kept ready for her."

"There seems to be quite a small village," Edith observed.

"Some of the objects that look like buildings from here are only the sod walls of corrals, while others are but sheds, tool houses, and the like," he explained, his attention occupied with holding back the horses, rendered fretful by the nearness of their goal.

"And who lives here, did you say?"

"Only the foreman, Mr. Blythe, and six boys—cow-punchers, you know—besides the cook and myself, are stopping here just now," he answered, unconcernedly stopping the team before a last gate.

"And is there nobody else?" faltered Miss Ellery in blank amazement, heedless of the reins he half offered.

Digitized by Google

"Nobody, barring the stranger within our gates," he said, with a friendly little smile that seemed to bid her welcome to the place, as he dismounted to lead the horses through the gate.

"And is the cook a—cowboy too?" she asked, when he returned to the wagon, eying him as though disposed to call him to account for a condition of things quite evidently not to her liking.

"Well, by brevet rank, I fancy he counts himself one," he answered, smiling at the idea; then, with a quick change of expression, as he seemed to grasp the meaning of the cold discontent expressed upon her face, he added: "But—oh! I say, it is all right, you know. I should not have brought you otherwise, of course. You will have the family quarters quite to yourself, which may be a bit dull and lonely for you, but you will at least be comfortable and —perfectly safe."

Miss Ellery smiled perfunctorily, her face turned from him as she stared ahead. The place, unrelieved by any light, seemed to wear an air of eerie desolation in the gathering shadows; and the winds, in Wyoming never wholly silenced, sighed depressingly as they swept the barren hills. The buoyant courage that generally sustained her seemed oozing away as she looked. With swift impulse, she asked herself

Digitized by Google

if her instinctive distrust might not be a premonition she would do well to heed. This ranch seemed so wholly out of the world, so beyond the pale of human ken—a place where anything might happen. And to be there among a horde of rude cowboys, without one womanly presence to give hostage for their good conduct, seemed for the moment a prospect to almost take away her breath.

"I am sure it must be very comfortable," she rejoined at length, measuring her companion anew in a sweeping glance that was a little reassuring. Instinctively she felt that she might look to him for protection in any event; but still the situation was unusual, unconventional; she did not like it. "But, now that we are started, why can we not go on to K 6 ranch?" she urged, in a wheedling tone. "I should be glad to pay liberally for your trouble."

"It is not a question of being paid," he answered, his manner showing a certain hurt dignity; "and I should not particularly mind the trip myself, alone and on horseback; but to undertake it with you—can't you see that it is on your account that it is not to be thought of?"

"But if I am willing to take the risk——"

"You do not know what the risk means. If you were compelled to spend the night in the

Digitized by Google

open air, listening to the voices of the wolves and coyotes, you would blame me more severely for having brought you to such unpleasantness than you do now because I refuse to go."

"But if Mr. and Mrs. Ellery had come to meet me, wouldn't they have driven back to-night?"

"By no means. They always stop over-night when they come. The round trip is too much for one day."

Edith sighed, abandoning the point with evident reluctance. "But as you are situated, it seems rather—well, not altogether desirable that you should be called to entertain a woman," she hesitatingly observed. "I am afraid I ought not to have come."

"I am sorry that it did not occur to me in the first place to tell you that no women are here," he returned, with simple directness, a glint of impatience in his eyes. "But I have lived so long in the West that it did not enter my mind; I had simply forgotten that a lady could feel herself in an embarrassing position, even perhaps unprotected and in danger, with a dozen honest men about her."

"But I did not say anything of the sort," she cried, vexed that he had dared to read her thought so clearly. "I only think of the trouble I may make—the nuisance I must be.

Digitized by Google

And I should, of course, much prefer to go on to K 6; but, since you are unwilling to undertake that—" hoping she might yet goad him to assent.

"Perhaps you would prefer to go back to the station," he observed, his sunburned face flushed a shade darker than it had been before, while he coolly slackened the pace of the horses, awaiting her decision. "You could be sure of a chaperon there, of course, although the rôle might be a new one for honest Mrs. Flannigan."

"Certainly I don't want to go back," she returned tartly, nettled at the scoffing tone. "Now that I am here, I propose to stay—if I may be allowed."

"As a choice of evils?" he asked, smiling broadly. Edith looked away in chill dignity as they drove down the last low hill, the road passing by the assemblage of barns before reaching the house. "Mr. Blythe, the manager, is standing in the doorway yonder," the young man remarked as they neared the first building. "I will call him. He has charge of the house."

Edith had been curiously regarding the group of men, rough of dress and in no case prepossessing of feature, who in turn appeared all intent in eying the person at Brown's side. At his call, one detached himself from the rest, shambling awkwardly up to the wagon, an indi-

Digitized by Google

vidual in whom Miss Ellery found her ideal of the cowboy, somewhat shaken by the looks of her escort, almost restored. This person was plainly of more common clay, and painfully conscious of that fact in the presence of this smartly gowned young woman.

"Let me introduce Mr. Blythe, Miss—" Brown began, halting at the name with a glance courteously questioning.

"My name is Ellery; I am Hugh Ellery's sister," she said, addressing the newcomer with her most gracious smile, and going on to explain at once about the miscarried telegram. "I wanted to hire a team to take me to K 6 ranch to-night, but Mr. Brown did not seem to think it possible," she said in conclusion, with a lingering hope that this gentleman might perhaps be inclined toward the furtherance of her wishes.

"No; hardly pay you to make that trip by night, unless you like camping, and there's a heap of cactus along the way," he responded, with a wooden smile. "And there's no need, either; we've got room enough here, Lord knows. Drive on to the house, Brown, 'n' we'll see what we can do to make the lady comfortable." In some way he attached himself to the back of the heavily loaded buckboard, springing down presently to open a door of the house with

Digitized by Google

cordial, if somewhat embarrassed, hospitality. "Come right in," he cried, as Brown helped the girl to the ground. "And here, you, Joe!" going to the door and shouting in the direction of the barn, "come over 'n' hold these hosses while Brown brings in the lady's things. Guess I'll jest light up a fire fust thing; it grows chilly here evenings." This last was addressed to the guest, who stood by the door, glancing curiously about the room. It was still light enough to see that the place was furnished with a certain elegance, although bare of ornament, and arranged with the uncompromising stiffness that told of a masculine hand.

"You can take any or all of these rooms," Mr. Blythe remarked, hospitably throwing open a couple of doors, revealing other apartments that seemed but to duplicate the first in all essentials, "'n' the cook'll have supper ready for you in a couple of minutes. What—you won't take a bite?" he protested, with very emphatic disappointment as she hastily declined. "Oh, you'd better have just a little something. We don't put on much style but there's plenty of grub, such as it is." But Miss Ellery would have nothing to eat. She had had a late dinner in the dining-car. "Well, of course, if you think of anything you would like, you'll speak of it," he said, abandoning the point reluctantly.

Digitized by Google

"And what time would you like to be called for your breakfast, ma'am?"

"I should like to start as early as possible," she returned, with an inquiring glance at Brown, who had just brought an armful of wood for the box behind the stove. "Could we get away by eight o'clock?"

"Certainly, if you wish," the young man answered, while Blythe grinned broadly at the notion of this hour being reckoned early where the working day began at half past four. "Shall I tell the cook to call you at seven? Very well. Then we can get started as soon as you are ready after."

"And I hope you'll sleep well, ma'am," said Blythe, ceremoniously lifting his hat as he turned to go.

"I hope you'll be comfortable," Brown added, halting on the doorstep, with a glance around the room obviously searching for something else which might be done. "If the fire gets low, or should you want anything, if you will just come to the door and clap your hands, Mexican fashion, I shall be sure to hear you. And if the dogs should happen to get noisy in the night, don't let it make you nervous. Nothing can possibly molest you."

"You are very kind. Good night, and thank you so much," she returned gratefully.

Digitized by Google

The unaffected eagerness of these men to contribute to her comfort roused a sense of shame for her ungracious doubts. The novelty of the situation had even become pleasantly exciting. Brown had lighted the lamp upon a small centre table, drawing an easy-chair invitingly beside it; and with the fire in the corner stove sending forth its crackling song of cheer, the room had taken on an air fairly cosy and homelike.

Left alone, with alert curiosity she went about examining her surroundings in detail. This main room of the *suite*, which seemed to have been fitted up with the cast-off furnishings of some city home, was an unconventional blending of parlour and bedroom; and in her restless investigation she happened to catch sight of herself in the broad mirror over a dresser, stopping with desultory interest that had nothing to do with vanity, idly surprised at the unaccustomed brightness of the brown eyes that seemed now almost black, with a touch of pleased appreciation for the brilliant colour her cheeks had caught from the winds that had so becomingly roughened the nut-brown hair. A whimsical questioning arose in her mind as she looked. She wondered what measure of admiration had been roused in the mind of this man Brown, whose orbit could not often have been crossed by women of her world. And yet she

Digitized by Google

could not be sure—her thoughts reverting to him in puzzled inquiry. There was something about him suggesting experiences beyond the bounds of these Wyoming plains.

At this point she was roused from her reverie by a knock at the door, to discover a grinning fellow bearing a tray.

"Mr. Brown thought you might like a cup of tea, miss, even if you do not care for supper," he said civilly, moving the lamp aside to deposit his burden upon the table. He was evidently the cook of the establishment, his crisply starched white jacket plainly donned in its freshness for the occasion. "Mrs. Cameron often likes a cup of tea in her room when she is down," he went on. "And I just brought a little bread and cold beef and a bit of jelly, to kinder help the tea along like. And Mr. Brown sent the magazines, thinking you might like something to read. And I'll just fetch you some fresh water, if you please," snatching up a pitcher from the washstand and vanishing with it through the inner room.

A low laugh broke from the girl's lips as she looked at the improvised tea table, whereon was provender sufficient for a couple of hungry men. "Well, if one must be wrecked, one could hardly do better than this," she murmured, luxuriously inhaling the fragrance of the tea that was per-

Digitized by Google

suasively appealing to a latent appetite. "As a desert island, indeed, it could hardly be better—thanks to my man Friday, whose full name is "—curiously reading the pencilled signature on the books—"' Paul Brown '—Paul Brown, a breaker of horses in this western wilderness, but who nevertheless writes his name like a gentleman of education, talks like a gentleman of education, and reads Harper's and The Century. Really, Mr. Brown, of all the charming features of this most charming desert island, I think you are quite the most mysteriously interesting."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER II

THERE was a moment of new discomfiture the next morning when the buckboard was at the door, and Miss Ellery, prettily expressing appreciation for the hospitality she had enjoyed, asked Mr. Blythe for her bill.

"Bill!" he surprisedly repeated, with a broadening grin. "Well, really, Miss Ellery, I guess there won't be any bill this trip. We don't generally charge friends for a meal of victuals in Wyoming. Being sort of on the outside edge of the world, as you might say, we don't have much company, but such as comes along are welcome to what they get—you bet."

The girl drew back coldly, her vexed glance ranging the landscape as though to find there solution of the difficulty. The most careful hostess could not have been more mindful of her comfort than had been these rough men. The kind thoughtfulness that had sent the luncheon to her room the night before had again spoken in the hot water that the cook brought to the door when he called her in the morning.

Digitized by Google

And later, when he came to show her the way to the dining room, where she breakfasted alone, it was to find the table laid with a daintiness that must have taxed to the utmost the resources of the establishment, a bunch of fresh wild flowers in a glass beside her plate especially moving her to grateful appreciation. But, while quite alive to each smallest attention, and the more for the piquant spice of unexpectedness, she yet had been coolly disposed to accept everything as upon a business basis, to be paid for in due time. It had been her understanding that it was a part of the regular purpose of the place to provide entertainment for such travellers as happened that way, and she found a suggestion almost humiliating in the manager's simple speech. These men had received her as a friend; in the absence of the proprietor she had really been their guest.

"But this is preposterous," she sharply protested. "I was a perfect stranger——"

"Mr. Ellery's sister couldn't be considered a stranger at Cameron's ranch," put in Blythe, with his wooden grin. "'N' besides, I don't see who you could pay anyhow, seeing that I ain't authorized to collect bills, 'n' Mr. Cameron ain't here hisself, don't you see?"

"And I suppose there is no ginger jar on the

Digitized by Google

mantelpiece," the girl remarked with humorous appreciation of her own perplexity.

"A which?" bewilderedly returned the honest gentleman, whose reading had evidently stopped a long way short of the adventures of the ladies Lecks and Aleshine.

"But why shouldn't you leave the matter for your brother to settle with Mr. Cameron, Miss Ellery?" Brown diplomatically suggested. And with this arrangement Edith was finally forced to go upon her way, although feeling sure that the account was never to reach more substantial settlement than was embodied in her own thanks.

"It makes me rather uncomfortable," she confidentially remarked to Brown, looking back at the manager who stood at the gate waving a last friendly farewell. "I feel as though I had not said half enough, since he would let me give him nothing but words."

"I am sure you have quite overwhelmed him," he returned, smiling broadly. "I hope, by the way, you have forgiven me for bringing you to the place."

"I am afraid it is you who are not forgiving," she answered him, her eyes upon the horizon, her cheeks flushing rather uncomfortably; "but I was so ungracious, so rude, last night. I want to apologize."

Digitized by Google

"Oh, don't speak of it," he hurriedly rejoined, adding with rather perfunctory courtesy, "it was quite natural, I am sure."

"I was so tired; and it was all so strange," she urged in extenuation. "I hardly know what I did expect; but it was all so lovely, after all. Everybody was so kind, and you especially, Mr. Brown. Which reminds me that I have not thanked you for the magazines; it was so thoughtful of you to send them."

"I was afraid they might be only back numbers to you; but I happened to have nothing else."

"You are fond of reading," she observed tentatively.

"Of light reading—yes. I enjoy the magazines at odd moments. I have no time, even if I had the energy left, for heavy literature."

"You are very busy?" curiosity in the tone.

"Generally time is not allowed to grow heavy on my hands."

"I am afraid I have taken you from some work this morning," an odd sense of dismay following the suggestion as she suddenly reflected that somebody else might have been sent to drive the team.

"Oh, no," he protested, reddening slightly. "And then I know the way so much better than any of the others that it was best I should

Digitized by Google

come," adding after a moment, with obvious desire to change the subject: "I judge you are interested in photography. You will find a large field for your snap shots at K 6."

"You know the place?" she asked eagerly. "You have been there?"

"Yes; I've been there several times. It is rather a nice country."

"Nicer than this, I hope," she rejoined, her glance ranging the landscape before them with a somewhat cheapening air.

"No better range," he said, with the eye of a cattle man upon the vast fields of grazing ahead. "But Big Cow Creek is quite a pretty stream, with a good many trees along its banks, which one appreciates in a land where, for the most part, there are hardly trees enough to hang the horse thieves on. The country is more hilly and broken, much more picturesque than this."

"Mrs. Ellery has written of the wild roses there; she says there is not such another wilderness of them to be found anywhere. She wanted to call the place Wild Rose ranch, but my brother would not have it. He said it did not sound like business: but K 6—well, it certainly has a sound of business, but——"

"It smells too much of burned hair?" he laughed, as she hesitated; "that is, you think

Digitized by Google

it a little too suggestive of the branding iron?"

"It isn't a pretty name," she pronounced decidedly.

"Ah, so many things about the cattle business are not pretty!" he exclaimed, laughing again.

They had passed over a line of low hills, zigzagging down a sandy draw on the other side; and now the road, mere wheel-marks almost overgrown with grass and flowers, stretched before them in a hazily defined line soon lost in the distance. Almost at the horizon a windmill stretched its long arms idly against the sky; and beyond, a dotted line ran up and down over the rolling expanse, the posts of miles of barbed-wire fence. Nothing else broke the measureless, gray-green waste, grim as an ocean in eternal calm, save for the flowers that were everywhere —blue lupines crowding against the pink and white of astragali, the silken white petals of the Mexican poppies, party-coloured primroses, and the red flame of mallows.

"Yonder is the boundary of Cameron's land," Brown observed, indicating the line of posts. "Beyond that you will be quite outside the pale of good society—in other words, upon the public domain."

"Land which nobody owns?"

Digitized by Google

"Only a paternal Government, whose hold upon it is so slight that anybody may have it for the asking. If you would like to become a property holder in Wyoming, Miss Ellery, you will presently find yourself facing a glorious opportunity."

"I had thought of taking up some land when I came West," she smilingly confessed. "My brother has any number of claims."

"I suppose so," he dryly responded, yet smiling amusedly. "And will you take a preemption, or a homestead?"

"Oh, I want a desert claim, I think; that gives one the most acres, doesn't it? But I think the Government must offer me something rather more inviting than this. I don't want a desert without so much as an oasis in sight."

"And what do you intend to do with your land, when you have found a location sufficiently picturesque?—that is, if I am permitted to ask," he laughingly demanded.

"Ah, who knows? I think it will be enough to just keep it and enjoy the sensation of riches."

"It has not probably entered into your calculations that the possession could involve anything like *l'embarras de richesses?*"

"No; it hadn't occurred to me in this con-

Digitized by Google

nection," she returned absently, adding, after a moment, "You have not lived in Wyoming all your life, I suppose."

"I am not quite one of the aborigines," he replied, after a perceptible instant of hesitation, going on at once to ask, as though with no particular thought of changing the subject, "Have you noticed that bird?" He pointed to a tiny creature that was circling round and round as they went, keeping ever with them. "They are curious little fellows, those buffalo birds. They have a habit of following the stock about the range like regular satellites, seeming to form attachments for certain animals. It is amusing to study their queer little ways. When a couple of them happen to alight near one another, they will bob their heads back and forth like a couple of palsied old men saying 'How-de-do?' Then, perhaps, of a sudden they will seem to trump up some imaginary offence, humping their shoulders and wriggling their tails, swearing at one another in pantomime, as it were, while they go on to sharpen their bills upon the ground as though making ready to wade through gore and grant no quarter. But it is all a bluff, for, after trying to stare one another out of countenance for a moment or two, it always appears that one is afraid and the other dares not; and so the affair ends by both flying

Digitized by Google

away in a sort of shamefaced hurry, never stopping to look back."

"You have been very observing," she remarked, almost with irritation. Why was this man, in whom nature and education seemed to have worked together in the making of a gentleman, cut off from the world to which he seemed legitimately to belong, to be merely a breaker of horses in these Wyoming plains? Why, when she had so pointedly given him opportunity, would he not explain himself?

"Some things have been rather forced upon my observation," he said simply. "I was a line rider once, for a while. Then the stock, coyotes, wolves and prairie dogs, rattlesnakes and birds, were about all the society I had. Naturally I came to know them pretty well."

"Line rider?" she repeated, with a puzzled air.

"You don't understand the term. But you must know, then, that the Wyoming Stock Growers' Association has had a fence built along the eastern line of the State, to keep the cattle from drifting over into Nebraska in the heavy storms, as they used to do, involving much trouble and expense in getting them back, to say nothing of those never recovered. And four men are employed to ride along the line of this fence all the while, two to look after the cattle

Digitized by Google

and the others to take care of the fence. It is a dreary life for the poor wretches—almost as bad as herding sheep; and men go mad at that, you know."

"No, I didn't know; but I can imagine it. The life must be simply horrible—the unspeakable loneliness and the monotony of it," surveying the dreary waste before them with a shudder. "I can't imagine how any one could choose such a life."

"Few of us have the choosing of our lives," he returned quickly, the tone seeming to repel questioning as to the bearing of the comment upon his own case. "Fate likes to keep the game in her own hands, you know. And if some of us happen to find ourselves line riders in the shuffle, if we are philosophers, we simply grin and bear it."

"But I should think it would prove too much even for a philosopher to grin under such circumstances," she persisted, her glance plainly inviting explanation.

"Ah, philosophers grin at all things, Miss Ellery. They know that it looks better than crying, and that in nine times out of ten it goes just as far toward relieving the situation."

They were now well out upon the plains, the road, crossed and recrossed with the deeply trodden trails of cattle, mere lines of wheel-

Digitized by Google

marks, all so little worn and uncertainly defined that Edith began to comprehend the objection to undertaking the trip by night. It began to seem to her no less than wonderful that they could keep to the way by day without a compass. Cattle in vast numbers were scattered all about them, looking up from their grazing with heavy-eyed curiosity, now and then a sullen-faced Taurus moving a little toward them, as with half-formulated thought of battle. And presently from a rise ahead, seeming as though they had almost risen out of the ground, a band of horses crossed the way, following in single file their leader, exquisitely graceful in their lithe, free motion.

It reminded Paul Brown to speak of the round-up; and, seeing that she looked interested, he went on to describe the scene where thousands of cattle were gathered together, the wild, frightened creatures cowed to momentary helplessness, but ready to make a break for liberty at any moment. He told of the hundreds of riders swiftly circling about the herd; of the wiry little cow ponies, as intelligently trained in the running down of an unruly animal as the riders themselves. He described the routine of the round-up, its hardships and dangers; telling of the struggles with bucking horses, no more than half broken, that regularly

Digitized by Google

begins the cowboy's day; of the long hours of riding in the fierce sunshine, often where all the gold of earth could not purchase a drop of good water. He told of the dreariness of night herding, when, worn with the labours of the long, hard day, the unfortunates told off for that duty must ride about the herd hour after hour, always singing at the top of their lungs, partly to keep themselves awake, but more to divert the animals and prevent them from "milling," that crazy whirling round and round which may end in a stampede; going on to paint the horrors of that stampede by night, when the maddened animals *must* be rounded up and halted, even though to venture before those flying hoofs may mean no less than death for somebody. He told "of moving accidents by flood and field," ever encouraged to go on by the girl's rapt attention.

"Ah, it is all so exciting," she exclaimed, drawing a long breath when at length he paused with a shamefaced consciousness of unusual garrulity. "My brother is not a good correspondent; he has told us so little of this Western life, of these wild experiences. My sister-in-law has rather a gift for letter-writing, and has described the scenery about the ranch, so that I have something of an idea of it; but, of course, she could not tell of these things."

Digitized by Google

"And your brother is a cow-man—not a cowboy; there is a wide difference between the two," he remarked with a smile. "If he attends the round-up, he has only the fun of it."

"While you have had the work."

"Precisely; but there is fun in it too, for all concerned, though sometimes of rather rough sort. But, by the way, have you remarked that object ahead?"

"A carriage!—do you think—can it really be Hugh?" she cried, flushing with the consciousness that in the interest of this man's talk she had almost forgotten the possibility of meeting her brother.

"It is the Ellery outfit," Brown said with certainty, although the carriage was yet too far away for its occupants to be recognised. "It is the only four-in-hand in Wyoming, so far as I know," he added, his smile slightly sardonic, of which, however, Miss Ellery was quite unconscious, her eyes eagerly peering ahead. She could not guess that this turnout of Ellery's, a handsome victoria drawn by four spirited horses, incongruously fine against the grim background of bare plains, was generally regarded as fit subject for good-humoured smiles by his neighbours.

"I am so glad that you will not have to take the whole of the long drive," the girl observed,

Digitized by Google

with a slight accession of dignity, as though she had suddenly remembered who she was, and to what sphere of life it had pleased Heaven to call her.

"Are you?" he returned. "Well, perhaps you will excuse me if I say that I am not congratulating myself in the least on that fact. Indeed, if——"

"You are quite too kind," she hastily interrupted; "but I am sure I have made you trouble enough. Ah, it is"—the voice running into a crescendo of ecstasy, as she excitedly fluttered her handkerchief—"it *is* Hugh and Nelsine and the children!"

A moment later the sisters-in-law were clasped in tumultuous embrace, pouring out incoherent exclamations of joy between kisses and confused attempts at explanation, while Hugh Ellery, a broad-shouldered, blond-whiskered, sunburned, and handsome fellow of thirty, his own greeting cut short by the irrepressible enthusiasm of his wife, sat smiling sympathetically at their rapture. Brown waited rather awkwardly in the road, uncertain what to do.

"Oh, the baggage!" exclaimed Ellery presently, comprehending the dilemma. "There is a team a little behind coming for that; so just throw the small traps in here, and drive

Digitized by Google

on a bit with the rest, won't you, like a good fellow?"

"To think of our never getting your telegram until after ten o'clock last night!" cried Mrs. Ellery between two kisses. She was a small, strikingly graceful woman, of the brunette type, her black eyes flashing with a magnetic fire that held all glances captive. One quickly understood, watching her pretty, humming-bird sort of restlessness, how it was that her husband's eyes were always turning toward her with a sort of doglike devotion in their gray depths. "We happened to be invited out to tea at a neighbour's, ten miles from the ranch," she eagerly explained, "and of course we did not get the telegram until we got home. You can imagine that I was simply wild. I wanted to start right off; but the night was dark, and Hugh declared that you would know how to take care of yourself perfectly well. He says you always do."

"I am glad he is so appreciative of my abilities. But in this case I deserve no credit. Indeed, I don't know what I should have done but for Mr. Brown," turning to him with a smile of sweet friendliness. Now that her anxieties were at an end, she was in radiant good humour. "If he had not happened to be at the station——"

Digitized by Google

"And so you went over to Cameron's and were there all the while!" interrupted Mrs. Ellery rapturously. "How perfectly lovely!"

"Yes, it was—perfectly lovely," the girl agreed with a laugh. "Thanks again to Mr. Brown."

"It was only a matter of luck that I happened to be at the station; but of course I am very glad that I could be of use, and it is more than kind of you to make so much of it," he said, smiling back at her from his work of stowing her small baggage in the front of the carriage, where it considerably threatened the legs of the two small boys.

"Ah, the children will be crushed under my things. Come back here, you poor darlings! I want you both on my lap.—And shall I offer to pay him for the team and for his trouble?"—this last in a hurried whisper to Mrs. Ellery, behind a small boy's back. "He has been so kind, you know."

"Not for the world," returned the other emphatically; "he would take it as an insult.—It was so fortunate for Miss Ellery that you happened to be the friend in need," she went on, turning to Brown with a smile which to most men had been reward sufficient for any service. "And we are so much obliged to you and to everybody at Cameron's. I only wish

Digitized by Google

we could have known that she was in such good hands."

The wagon for the baggage had just come up, and Brown, with the driver of the team, was engaged in transferring Miss Ellery's belongings. The work kept him silent for a moment; but he turned then with a gay, infectious laugh that showed all his firm, white teeth. "Hospitality, like virtue, is its own reward sometimes, Mrs. Ellery," he said. "Angels' visits are few and far between at Cameron's. When they come, we consider the good fortune is all ours."

"What a charming remark!—Miss Ellery must thank you again," cried Mrs. Ellery vivaciously, proceeding at once, however, to engross the girl's attention with a flow of questioning and small talk that left no thought to spare for the young fellow still waiting beside the carriage.

"How soon are you going to be through at Cameron's?" asked Ellery. "We have quite a bunch of colts that ought to be broken, and I was going to write and ask if you could come over for a couple of months."

"Why, as to that, I ought to be getting back to my own place, I'm afraid, Mr. Ellery," he answered with an air of uncertainty, his eyes upon the ground. "I should like to oblige you, of

Digitized by Google

course, but—well, how soon would you want me?"

"Right now, if you could manage it; or as soon as you are through at Cameron's."

"I'm about through there now, but——"

"You might let us have a month now, if you could give us no longer, and then come again to finish the work in the fall," urged Ellery, rather anxiously.

"Well, perhaps, if that would do," the young man hesitantly returned, with a half glance at the back seat of the carriage.

"We'll call it settled, then!" exclaimed the other cordially. "Shall I send down for you?"

"No; I have my own horse at Cameron's, and will ride over in the course of the week if I can arrange it; otherwise I'll drop you a line."

The ladies had been paying no heed to anything beyond their own tumultuous flow of talk, but now, seeing that he was moving toward the buckboard, Edith started forward impulsively. "Oh, Mr. Brown, are you going?" she cried, holding out a small gloved hand. The man had been more than kind, and now that she might never see him again—for she had not heard a word of the arrangement her brother had been making—she felt that she could well afford to be gracious. "I appreciate all your kindness *so*

Digitized by Google

much. Thank you over and over again, and—good-bye."

"You needn't have shaken hands with him, dearie," murmured Nelsine, in nervous reproof a moment later; "but, of course, you could not know. His manners are so gentlemanly——"

"Excepting, perhaps, when he happens to be exhorting the bucking and impenitent bronco," laughed Hugh parenthetically.

"But he was so kind, and it made me uncomfortable not to be able to pay him," urged Edith apologetically.

"Don't let it trouble you any longer," laughed her brother teasingly. "There can be no doubt that he considers himself sufficiently rewarded now."

"There is something almost *suspiciously* refined about that young man's manner," observed Nelsine reflectively. "It wouldn't surprise me if he had a history, or if it should develop in course of time that he has been hiding in this out-of-the-way corner of the world for some reason."

"Ah, Nelsine, what an imagination you have!" laughed her husband indulgently, yet with a hint of disapproval in the tone. "Devoted to sensational literature, it ought to make your fortune. As for poor Brown, though, don't let his manners *unmake* the man. Give

Digitized by Google

the devil his due, and stick to what you really know about the fellow."

"But he doesn't seem quite like a common cowboy—at least not like my preconceived idea of the type," put in Edith interestedly. "What *do* you know about him?"

"Simply that he is Brown of Lost River, and the best bronco breaker in Wyoming."

"It seems rather odd," murmured the girl thoughtfully.

"It is *suspiciously* odd," insisted Mrs. Ellery very decidedly. "I know that he has a history."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER III

THE buildings of K 6 ranch were grouped in picturesque disorder on a plateau dotted over with trees, forming a small natural park at a bend of the creek. The small stream only deserved its title of Big Cow Creek in comparison with Little Cow Creek, a tiny consort flowing in the same direction some three miles across the country, uniting with its fellow a few miles below. In point of beauty both deserved fairer names, but the early settlers of Wyoming were practical souls, given to considering every landscape with reference to their particular interest, the cow. Certainly in all the length and breadth of the land no richer grazing ground could be found than this, where the cattle might stand knee-deep in the thick, lush grasses, in this blossom time of June. The narrow valley was walled in on either side by abrupt hills, revealing an ancient river bed; and along the banks of the stream ranged an endless procession of box elder trees, all gnarled and twisted, as though they had joyously wrestled with the winds of centuries, their fresh foliage a shimmering glory

Digitized by Google

of green and gold, while here and there an old cottonwood, towering head and shoulders above the others, appeared almost sombre in duller and darker dress. Crowding down from the hills into luxuriant masses by the banks of the stream was a gay riot of wild flowers of every hue, as though, for this brief carnival time of summer, Nature had been minded to give beauty for ashes with mad prodigality.

The house was a low, rambling structure, indifferently violating every known law of architecture in the series of additions that had grown upon the first settler's cabin; but within it was found to be most ingeniously contrived for comfort and convenience, lacking few of the luxuries that have come to be the necessities of modern refinement.

"It is not in the least an ideal cattle ranch," Edith declared, with a laughing affectation of disappointment. "I shall have to reconstruct my ideas from first to last. I came expecting to 'rough it,' and find silk portières and Persian rugs, high-art furniture and the latest books. I feel that I have been a victim of misplaced confidence; that 'the wild and woolly West' is a myth. This is simply a paradise."

She was lying in a hammock in the shade of the wide piazza, that, save for one broad entrance way, was all walled in on its open sides

Digitized by Google

with blossom-laden vines of the wild cucumber. Through the wreathed opening one looked down a velvety slope of lawn to the creek, where a noble group of trees leaned over thirstily, flickering lights chasing each other across the polished leaves as the light breeze buffeted the willing branches to and fro. A bridge crossed the creek in the shadow of the trees, and, resting upon its timbers at one side, a small flume carried water from the irrigating ditch on the one side to a garden on the other, the tiny flow laughing, gurgling, and rollicking along its pent-up way with ten times the noise of the creek below. Between the swaying branches one caught here and there a sapphire flash of the stream, winding in and out of dense wild-rose thickets as though idly bent upon searching out the fairest flowers, the banks guarded by a diminishing line of trees softly outlined against the pale, warm gray of sandy bluffs below.

Under the trees by the bridge, a pretty picture against the background of blending greens, stood a young girl in a blue cotton gown, bareheaded, and with well-rounded arms showing to the elbow. She was feeding a flock of downy chickens, the clang of the spoon beating against the pan sounding like an accompaniment of cymbals in the drowsy summer symphony of bird-song and the hum of insect life, the swish

Digitized by Google

of many leaves, and the rhythmical murmur of running water. Edith looked at the fair picture with a luxurious sense of enjoyment.

"You have not had time yet to find out the thorns beneath the roses," returned Nelsine, almost with an air of pique, being, in fact, rather given to certain airs of martyrdom by reason of her isolation and other ills involved in conditions which certainly had not been of her choosing.

"I shall see nothing but the roses, my dear; I never saw so many in all my life before. And to think that I have been actually pouring out sympathy upon you, you sweet impostor! You write charming letters, Nelsine, but you belong to the school of the impressionists; your scenery is always delightfully vague and sketchy. I had imagined you in a howling wilderness."

"Well, I think the wilderness is here, and you would discover that it can howl, too, if you happened to find yourself here in the winter. It doesn't appear to have struck you either that the roses, for the most part, are wasting their sweetness on the desert air. You forget that one of the drawbacks of Arcadia is that you have it all to yourself."

"No, I am far from forgetting it. I am counting that in with the roses and the other delights. Society is a nuisance."

Digitized by Google

"Ah, you are like a man who has just dined crying out, 'Who wants anything to eat?' You have been surfeited with the world, the flesh, and the devil."

"I have, my dear; and the last may take the first and welcome, so far as I am concerned at this minute," luxuriously swaying back and forth, enjoying the landscape with eyes half closed.

"You are blasphemous, you unconscionable creature! I lament afresh that we are fifty miles from church privileges."

"What a relief it must be in the matter of clothes! And the blessedness of being free to find 'tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones,' and all that sort of thing, without the drawback of a rustling, coughing, fan-swaying congregation! But I suppose there are neighbours somewhere," returned Edith, her glance speculatively ranging the distant hills.

"Oh, yes; within a radius of fifty miles there are several families—such as they are. Good people, too—that is, good enough," in the tone of one magnanimously minded to give the devil his due. "But you know the type—Nottingham lace curtains in the parlour, and 'God Bless Our Home' over the mantel!"

"I recognise the description," smiled the

Digitized by Google

girl, languidly amused. "And I suppose there is a hair wreath and perhaps some worsted flowers in deep frames on the wall, and a big, big Bible, conspicuously new and unused, on the centre table."

"Precisely," Nelsine assented, with an aggrieved air that said she had ceased to find the picture amusing. "And against that background behold gingham-gowned women who can only answer me 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am' when I fairly pelt them with questions. Why *do* they so persistently cling to that 'Yes, ma'am' and 'No, ma'am,' do you suppose—women of that type? Why can't they understand that it relegates them to the level of your servant girl, and nips friendly familiarity right in the bud? Though, for that matter, the Western servant girl leaves such flourishes defiantly alone. Your neighbour may distress you with her airs of deference, but the girl in your kitchen is altogether free and equal. *Viola la différence entre ceci et cela.*"

"*Et celle-la,*" laughed Edith, glancing down at the girl in the blue gown, who had put down her pan and was now gathering roses on the other side of the creek, "is she one of the natives, to no manners born?"

"Artalissa—" returned Nelsine vaguely. "Oh, Artalissa is from Nebraska."

Digitized by Google

"Artalissa of Nebraska—what a fetching title that would be for a novel!" idly pleased with the idea. "And she wouldn't make a bad heroine—in a cleaner gown. She is very pretty."

"And I fancy she could tell a bit of a story, if she chose. I have heard hints of a romance; somebody—I think it was her sister—married her lover."

"And Artalissa's heart was broken," observed Edith, with the unthinking indifference we give to the tragedies of other lives.

"If it was, she believes in the theory of *Similia similibus curantur*. In her small sphere Artalissa works havoc. The boys on the place are all dead in love with her, for which I am devoutly thankful, hoping they may prove a sufficient attraction to induce her to stay."

"Death to the frogs, perhaps, but——"

"Oh, 'men have died from time to time—but not for love,'" rejoined Nelsine, calmly cynical. "The servant-girl question in Wyoming is too serious for one to be squeamish about trifles—another of the drawbacks of Arcadia. We have work enough here for two girls, but, even with the bait of thirty dollars a month, it is all we can do to find one. And when I read of the thousands of workingwomen on the verge of starvation in the sweat shops of

Digitized by Google

New York, it makes me furious. If only the silly philanthropists would stop talking and writing and passing resolutions about it, and devote their energies to bringing those women into the Western kitchens, where they are needed——"

"She is really handsome," Edith irrelevantly put in, her eyes following the girl among the roses. "There is even a certain air of refinement about her. I should hardly have picked her out in a crowd as belonging to that class."

"That class! For pity's sake, Edith, don't breathe such a thought aloud!" exclaimed the other, with comical affectation of dismay. "Artalissa belongs to the best society—in Arcadia—if you please. She teaches school in the winter, while in summer she condescends to do housework in certain well-recommended families, having discovered that thirty dollars a month with board is not so very far behind the teacher's salary. She has a canny eye to business, has Artalissa. Fancy: she has taken up a homestead in Nebraska, has it all fenced, and has built a house and had a well dug, all from her own earnings. She always mentions the well, good water having an appreciable value in Nebraska. Now she is working and saving money to get some stock on the place, while with the stock I suppose will come a husband to round it

Digitized by Google

up for her—if she does not take the man first. I live in fear and trembling—such havoc Cupid has played in my kitchen. Never a girl have I had who has not been married within six months of her coming. There seems to be a fatality about the place. I believe even you would succumb—hard-hearted little wretch that you are! —if only there was a man in the country whom you could possibly marry."

Edith only laughed, looking away, while a very perceptible blush stole into her face.

"And, speaking of that," went on Nelsine insinuatingly, hitching her chair a degree nearer, "do you know, dear, I rather thought, when I was East last summer, that Marshall Woodbury might have posed as the conquering hero long before this."

"Yes?" rejoined Edith demurely, yet laughing again.

"Did you tell him No, you cruel girl?" demanded the other with eager curiosity. "Be a dear, and tell me all about it."

"There is so little to tell," rejoined the girl rather petulantly, hesitating a little. "But I did not say No."

"Heaven be praised!" quoth Nelsine, with laughing emphasis. "I am half in love with Mr. Woodbury myself, and from the moment of our meeting I have yearned to have him for

Digitized by Google

a brother-in-law. And if you would go on and tell me that you have said Yes——"

"Well, I can't say that exactly; but perhaps you will consider it the next best thing that I have taken a couple of months to consider what I will say."

"You have!" cried Nelsine in an ecstatic crescendo, swooping upon her with kisses. "You dear, dear girl! And to think of your never saying a word about it until I had fairly to pry the truth out of you by main force! And that was the reason of the sudden plan to visit us," darting at the conclusion with swift, feminine method. "I just knew there was something beyond the mere desire to see us—you dear sweet thing!"

"You are too modest," rejoined the girl, drawing somewhat away from an embrace that threatened to become over-warm for the day. "I have been talking of coming ever since you have been here, if you will remember; and when Mrs. Hallet was going to Denver, and insisting that she must bring me with her—well, really, my mind was made up to come before—*this*—happened."

"Well, it doesn't matter why you came, so long as you are here," returned Nelsine, wheedling tenderness in the tone. "The main thing now is the delightful *this*. You must tell me when

Digitized by Google

it happened, how it happened, and all about it. And why did you hesitate, you perverse child?"

"The woman who hesitates is lost," the girl murmured absently, her gaze following the line of the creek. "I don't know, Nelsine; I feel rather lost when I think of it."

"It was not my way," went on the other reflectively. "When I fell in love with Hugh—ah, me, what a goose I was!—I could hardly eat or sleep until I was sure of him; but you—" She paused, studying the girl's face with a sort of irritated wonder.

"My appetite continues good, thank Heaven," laughed Edith unconcernedly; "and, unless I dissipate with coffee at unconscionable hours, I still enjoy the sleep of the just."

"You don't appear to have it in you to make a goose of yourself in that way, like the rest of us," protested Nelsine, a touch of reproach in the tone. "You have flirted too much. It has spoiled you."

"I have—experimented a little. Be just to me, dear."

"I'm sure I don't know what you expected."

"I expected a miracle to happen, and it failed me. I asked that the water be turned to wine, but——"

Digitized by Google

"You demanded too much. Men are none of them perfect."

"But one must—experiment to find that out. One must be educated up to the point of compromise."

"Oh, you are simply irrational!" exclaimed Nelsine pettishly. "Here is a man who offers you everything you could possibly ask for—money, brains, good family—everything. To be sure, there is a slight disparity in point of years, but there is *every* compensating advantage. You ought to be perfectly happy."

"I quite agree with you. I ought, certainly."

"And I suppose you *do* care for him a little, or you would not even consider it."

"I care for him a great deal. If I am ever to marry at all, I am sure I could hardly do better. He is very nice."

Nelsine's face wore a baffled look. "He adores you, of course," she observed tentatively.

"Oh, as to that, I might say, in the words of the good Book, 'He is of age: ask him,'" irony in her laugh. "For that matter, when affections are served up warmed over—he is a widower, you may remember—and who is it says of second love that it is but a flower laid on the grave of the first?"

Digitized by Google

"Oh, don't; how can you?—when it is such utter nonsense, too. The adaptability of men's hearts——"

"Oh, certainly; it is the adaptability of the lobster in the matter of its claws. We have all heard the comparison so often, and we have so many reasons for knowing it must be true. Only if one were disposed to be finical—unreasonably exacting, in choosing the lobster, a first growth of claws might seem preferable, on the whole, don't you think?"

"No, I don't," retorted Nelsine flatly. "I don't think it matters a picayune, so long as there are claws a-plenty. But I am getting at the root of the difficulty, you unreasonable, spoiled child: you are only a little touched with jealousy for the other woman—the one who enjoyed the first claws, to use your preposterous figure of speech. And the fact that you can show such a feeling proves that down in your heart you care for him a good deal more than you are ready to admit, you proud little iceberg!"

"Well, to be honest, that is what I tell myself a hundred times a day," the girl returned, with a whimsical smile. "I say to myself that I do care for him—I must; but, somehow, when the next day comes I find that I have to begin the story all over again. It is like Penelope's

Digitized by Google

needlework; only, truly, dear, I don't undo it on purpose. And—don't look so discouraged, Nelsine—I am not yet wearied with well-doing. Perhaps, with two months of repetition, the statement will stick."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IV

THE days at the ranch slipped by in an unbroken calm, that to Edith was the perfection of restfulness. It was as though they had a new world all to themselves, a world as fresh and fair as though just from the creating hand; as far removed from the fashions and follies and falsehoods of the everyday haunts of men as the stars are from the earth. In mellowed splendour the sun came up over the hills to chase away the morning mists, and the shadows slowly crept from one side of the trees to the other, as though loath to stir at all in that fair kingdom of repose; the leaves whispered of nothing all the day long, and always the waters laughed mockingly to hear their silly secrets.

The cattle had been driven to distant ranges to preserve the rich grazing of the bottom lands for winter feeding, and, afoot or on horseback, one might roam the country for miles around with the certainty of encountering nothing more formidable than a frightened jack rabbit. Three afternoons of the week the carriage with its four prancing horses appeared at

Digitized by Google

the door, and the family went gaily away to fetch the mail from a ranch house some four miles away, serving as the post office for a wide radius of country. Other than this, the life of the place drifted on with few fixed plans, and little occurred of more moment than when the cackling of a hen proclaimed the advent of another egg.

Under such conditions it was natural that the household should be charged with excitement when, late one morning, Hugh rode up to the door to announce that Morris Cameron would be with them for lunch.

"He is driving a bunch of cattle over to his Lost River place," he hastily explained. "A couple of his men have just come in, and you can see the grub wagon over the hill yonder. The whole outfit will make camp across the creek. I am just riding over with the children to meet them."

"The whole outfit," repeated Edith vaguely, lifting herself from her favourite hammock to peer across the creek. "Does he mean that the whole party will be here for luncheon?"

"Heaven forbid!" quoth Nelsine devoutly. "We must have Mr. Cameron, of course, but the men will camp. The question is, what shall we have?"

Digitized by Google

"You don't see much of the cowboys," Edith absently observed.

"We don't see much of anybody else, more's the pity."

"I mean, you don't see much of them socially."

"I should hope not."

"Some of them seem quite surprisingly—respectable."

"Oh, they're respectable enough," Nelsine indifferently rejoined, her thoughts upon the luncheon. "And on most ranches, I believe, the men are treated quite as members of the family, while the servant girl may almost regard herself as a distinguished guest. They all eat in the kitchen and herd together generally. There was a good deal of surprise and quite a little feeling—more particularly on the part of the girl—when it developed that I would have the dining room reserved for the family, and that my table must be properly served. Artalissa resents it yet—that she, a school teacher from Nebraska, should be excluded, except in the capacity of waitress. The wages serve as a bribe, but not as complete alleviation. In her heart she always hates me for it. But, Edith, do give your mind to what we are going to have. Shall it be *bouillon* for the first course? We shall have to use the beef extract, and I

Digitized by Google

am so tired of the stuff; I can hardly choke it down: but my *bouillon* cups are *so* pretty!"

"Oh, have it, by all means," Edith carelessly returned. "But, speaking of Artalissa, I don't wonder she feels the slights involved in her position. As a servant, she is altogether exceptional. She is a lady, according to her lights, fairly well educated, strikingly handsome, and I suppose you entertain many guests who are no more refined. From her point of view it must seem unjust that she—simply because she has elected to do housework, really the most womanly occupation she could choose—should find herself ostracized. We can not blame her if she resents it."

"I know," assented Nelsine fretfully; "but I must have my table properly served—which takes us back to the subject in hand. And you're not helping me a bit, Edith. What can you suggest for a second course? Shall it be devilled crabs?—they are about as nice as anything that comes canned, and, happily, Mr. Cameron is sufficiently up-to-date not to try to eat the shells, as one of our bucolic neighbours did when he struggled with the pitfalls of our hospitality one day."

"Did he live?" laughed Edith, lazily amused.

"Oh, yes; he lived—to nearly choke to

Digitized by Google

death with an olive stone a minute later. But shall we have French dressing, or *mayonnaise*, for the lettuce, dear? And would you mind arranging the flowers?"

The table made a pretty showing with its glittering array of silver and cut glass, its dainty bits of china, and the great bowl of wild roses resting upon a centrepiece of linen exquisitely embroidered with the same flower. Except that she knew Nelsine's enjoyment in the little bustle of preparation and the opportunity to show her pretty wares, Edith would have thought the effort thrown away when she was introduced to their guest. At the first glance it seemed that he might be better suited with the rude fare of camps than all this dainty show of luxury. He was a man whose age was not to be guessed at a glance. The supple strength of his well-proportioned form suggested the glow of youth, but this seemed rather at variance with the hardy, sunburned face, which, although keenly alert, yet looked worn and tired; while his talk incidentally revealed experiences to outweigh the tame happenings of a dozen ordinary lives. His host, with thought for Edith's entertainment, led him on to speak of his early frontier life; of the time that he had been a post trader in Nebraska, or driving a stage in Colorado; of episodes of mining in Ari-

Digitized by Google

zona, with the excitement of "striking it rich" or "going broke"; of encounters with Indians, horse thieves, and hold-ups. And finally he was induced to relate, in his dry, humorous drawl, the story of how the Vigilantes "cleaned out" Cheyenne and Laramie City of objectionable characters in one of the rude spasms of civic virtue incident to the early days.

Edith listened with glowing eyes. Here was a glimpse of that wild West of which she had dreamed. "There were giants in those days," she quoted with a smile.

"I don't know about that," rejoined Cameron, his keen eyes appreciatively considering the girl's flushed prettiness. "There were plenty of bad men who talked big, but when you came to size 'em all up they averaged pretty small. Some that talked the biggest, I've seen shrivel down 'most to nothing at the touch of a rope."

"But didn't it happen that men were hung sometimes who were innocent?" she asked, with a frightened shudder.

"Oh, no doubt," returned the guest, in a tone of comfortable indifference as he reached for another olive. "But what of that? I'm sure it must be a heap better for a man *afterward* if he happens to be hung innocent rather than guilty."

Digitized by Google

"But, unfortunately, the majority of men are not anxious to gamble on the afterward in that way," put in Ellery, laughing.

"Well, that's all in the deal; it's bound to come, sooner or later," imperturbably enjoying his olive. "But, of course, when anything happened by—er—mistake, everybody felt—er—well, I'm sure the participants felt apologetic, at least. Unluckily, though, by the time they felt that way it was generally too late for apologies to do any good, except as repentance might salve over their own consciences. I remember a couple of fellows caught up for horse stealing at Cow Siding, a place just beyond Laramie, when the railroad was building. There wasn't a tree in the camp to hang them on, and when they came to take account of stock it turned out that there wasn't but one rope in the whole outfit. But there was a pretty tough crowd running things that night, and they just looped a fellow at each end of the rope and threw one of them over the stock-yard fence, leaving the poor devils to hang one another with their struggles. I've heard stories of that sort of thing being done, but that was the only time I ever saw it, or ever wanted to. It was tough, for a fact. And the worst of it was that next morning they discovered that one of the corpses was the wrong fellow! I've always been shed-

Digitized by Google

ding pity on the memory of that fellow, somehow; but when you come to think it all over, up one side and down the other, so to speak, I believe I'd enough sight rather have been him than the fellow at the other end of the rope. He was in lots better shape to go before the judgment seat, at any rate," a whimsical smile creasing his face.

"But it was brutal—inhuman!" cried Mrs. Ellery, hardly knowing whether the man was in jest or earnest. "Thank Heaven, the day of the Vigilantes is over."

"But the Vigilantes are not all dead yet," exclaimed Cameron, his smile growing grim. "And some of these fellows will be finding it out if they don't quit running off stock the way they've been doing lately. It's almost reached a point when they're ready to snatch the branding iron out of a man's hand. Have they made any trouble for you, Ellery?"

"Not yet; but my turn may be coming," Hugh carelessly returned. "They are probably waiting till I get my colts broken, to save themselves trouble when they take their pick. I've got about as pretty a bunch of colts as you'd want to look at, Cameron."

"And you've engaged Brown to handle them, he tells me. He came up with us, you know—is back there with the cattle. Best

Digitized by Google

horse breaker in Wyoming, that fellow. Has a good head on him, too. Began with nothing —I know, for I was the first man he worked for in this country; and now he has a place over in the Lost River country; good range and well sheltered, winter losses small, and calf crop big right straight along. And at odd times he works around breaking horses at big wages, and every dollar he gets goes right into stock, and he's getting ahead fast. Queer chap, too, for a horse breaker; lets cards and drink and all kinds of foolishness alone, and, without any fuss or feathers about it, walks as straight a line as any ordained sky pilot. Don't know as I ever heard him swear even, and if there is any one business under the light of the canopy especially calculated to bring out all the swear that's in a man, it's horse breaking. He's a queer one for these parts—sure."

"My wife insists that he is too queer," laughed Ellery. "She believes he must be some prince in disguise."

"Now, Hugh, I never said anything of the sort," pouted Nelsine. "But he does seem almost too gentlemanly for his position, doesn't he, Mr. Cameron? And I say the chances are that he has a history."

"In the early days it used to be considered not overpolite or wise to ask a man too many

Digitized by Google

questions," the guest returned with a laughing shrug, "and the habits of that acquired discretion have somehow stuck by me. I have never asked Brown anything about his past, thinking perhaps he would just as lieve I wouldn't."

"There! you have tacitly admitted that you agree with me," cried Nelsine triumphantly, while Edith looked interested. "You, too, have credited him with a past that he might prefer not to be questioned about."

"I don't know that anybody has any business with his past—so long as his cattle brands are all right," put in Ellery, with some impatience, seeing that Cameron looked slightly discomfited. "Beyond that he may be the Nathan murderer, or the lost Charlie Ross, or any other celebrity you like, if only the Pinkertons will leave him alone till my colts are well broken."

Directly after luncheon Cameron rode away, and the family soon followed in the carriage. A number of the K 6 cattle that had drifted down to the Cameron range during the storms of the late spring had been driven back, and it was thought that to see them "cut out" from the herd might amuse Edith, as well as offer new subjects for her camera.

They found the "outfit" on the other side of the creek, half a mile above the house. The

Digitized by Google

cattle were bunched in a compact body, held in fretful order by the men alertly guarding every side. As with one accord, the mass of shining red backs swayed and edged along, step by step, slowly going round and round, with the unerring animal instinct, gaining ground bit by bit on the side reaching toward water. Ellery drove up the steep slope of the hills forming the southern boundary of the valley.

"Put down that red parasol, Edith," he unceremoniously commanded, "or you may stampede the whole bunch. They are scary creatures, these Western cattle—wild as deer, and as whimsical and uncertain as women."

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed his wife, in a tone that laughingly contradicted the statement. "Box his ears, Edith; you are nearest him."

But Edith was watching with absorbed interest the movements of horsemen and cattle. A couple of riders were charging by devious ways through the herd, searching for the K 6 brand, the finding of which always created a small commotion, the animal so marked being obstinately reluctant to be taken from good company, and, when finally dislodged, determined on frustrating the efforts of the pursuers and regaining the lost place. The trained ponies seemed to enter into the rough game with

Digitized by Google

infinite zest, darting here and there as occasion demanded with the celerity of the wind, and almost of their own volition, as it seemed, their method fairly marvellous in circumventing the slow-witted and heavier-footed revolters. One after another was successfully convoyed to that part of the field where a couple of the K 6 men held the recovered strays together, while Cameron, a gallant figure on his spirited thoroughbred, hovered on the outskirts, occasionally making a little sally on his own account when some especially unruly animal threatened to escape.

The work was almost finished, when one maddened cow made straight up the hill toward the carriage, hotly pursued by Paul Brown. Edith, who had been focussing her camera upon the scene, suddenly became oblivious of the all-important button.

"Talk about being as clumsy as a cow!" exclaimed Hugh. "As you may observe, when a cow really gets down to running she can get over the ground like a deer. Watch that one now; and—great Scott! that fellow can sit a horse."

As Brown flew by the carriage he gave the occupants one swift glance, raising his hat with his left hand, while almost on the instant the coil of rope flew from his right, settling like a

Digitized by Google

thing alive around the horns of the crazed heifer. The shock of the sudden arrest, with the uncertain footing of the pebbly hill, threw the creature heavily upon her side, whence she helplessly slid a little way, struggling and panting painfully. Brown, sitting his horse like a Centaur, the fore legs of the trained animal immovably braced to withstand the strain, calmly took another twist of the rope about the saddle horn; the struggles ceased somewhat, and a little later a conquered and subdued heifer was roughly hurried down the hill to join the minority to which her brand had condemned her.

"Ah, why didn't you snap the button?—it was such a typical exhibition of cowboy skill," cried Nelsine, drawing a long breath. "And you won't often find a specimen of the cowboy equal to that man. I never saw anything finer than his pose as he threw that rope."

"But it was horrible!" gasped Edith, really pale and trembling. "I thought the poor cow would be killed."

"And would you have let it get away altogether?" laughed Hugh, mocking her agitation. "It was my property, if you please, and I can assure you that I have none to spare."

"I believe that makes the last one, Ellery," said Cameron, riding up now beside the carriage. "I suppose we ought to give that heifer

Digitized by Google

a vote of thanks, in the shape of an extra feed of alfalfa, for giving you a glimpse of real cowboy work," he smilingly added, turning to Edith. "I hope you enjoyed it."

"My sympathy went out to the cow almost too much for real enjoyment," she confessed. "It seemed so cruel to lasso the poor creature in that rough way, when she was making such a gallant run for freedom."

"Rope is the word, dear child," corrected Hugh. "Lasso is not good form in Wyoming. We say a rope rather than a lariat, though the latter is permissible; while to rope, or to lariat, is the verb—the former the commoner term."

"What a very graceful rider that man Brown is!" put in Mrs. Ellery, in an enthusiastic aside to Cameron.

"I wish his horse was fresh; he could show Miss Ellery some tricks well worth her snap shots," he returned. "And as it is—— Oh, I say, Brown," he called out, as he turned his horse down the hill, "can't you give the ladies a little extra riding? Just pick a few flowers for Mrs. Ellery, like a good fellow."

The young man hesitated an instant, with a swift, deprecatory glance at the carriage before putting spurs to his horse. Down the long field he darted like a shot, presently dropping from the

Digitized by Google

right side of the saddle, hanging by the merest touch of a foot in one stirrup, the horse going at full speed, while he swiftly plucked, flower by flower, a little bunch of the blue lupines.

Edith focussed her camera, but her fingers palpably trembled. "Is it safe? Oh, he will be thrown!" she cried, watching the movements of the rider in breathless apprehension.

"Not a bit of it," laughed Cameron. "That fellow can ride anything that wears hair, and hang on by the eyelids at that. For that sort of thing, too, the horse as well as the rider must have special training, and that brute of Brown's knows its business as well as he does his. There isn't the slightest danger."

"I'd like to own that horse," observed Ellery. "Wonder if I can trade him out of it."

"You could trade him out of his eyeteeth sooner," Cameron declared. "I know, for I've tried it. He thinks as much of that horse as some fellows do of their sweethearts. Not a human being, except himself, is allowed to lay a finger on the animal, to say nothing of riding him. You couldn't get the horse from him for all the land you've got under fence," turning down the hill to meet the rider, who was now near. Brown delivered his bouquet, raising his hat with a hasty, shamefaced glance toward the

Digitized by Google

carriage, as he rode back to rejoin the men who were holding the Cameron herd together.

"Don't you think that is the splendidest man in all the world, Aunt Edith?" exclaimed six-year-old Ralph, eagerly squirming around from the front seat to share his excitement with her. Edith could have given no reason for the flush that burned her cheeks at the question, nor for the quick sense of thankfulness that Nelsine's eyes were not upon her.

"No, I don't, you sweet thing! I think you are much splendider," she laughingly returned.

"I fink that man is a giant," observed chubby Roy, with an air of having given the subject profound consideration.

"No, he ain't," the elder brother declared, from his height of added years and superior knowledge; "he's just nothing but a man."

"But he's every inch a man, Roy; and when you grow up you are going to ride just as well as he does, aren't you?" said Cameron, as he handed the flowers to Mrs. Ellery.

"That's it," put in Ellery, "the fellow is simply a perfect specimen of the human animal. To watch him on a horse is to feel that to ride like that is absolutely the finest thing that a man can do, just because, by his way of doing it, it is high art. I've seen other good riders, but——"

Digitized by Google

"He is so much at ease, so graceful," put in Nelsine enthusiastically. "I was thinking again, as I watched him, how strange it is that such a man, handsome as an Apollo and evidently a gentleman, so far as education goes, should have made of himself nothing but a common horse breaker."

"'A man's a man for a' that,'" murmured Edith, glancing after the rider thoughtfully. "It seems to me that he has made of himself a very uncommon sort of a horse breaker."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER V

THE next day was one of those marked with a red letter in Nelsine's calendar. Possessed of a nice little talent for composition, of which she was not a little proud, and blessed with many appreciative friends, she was an indefatigable correspondent, and the triweekly mail was the principal interest in her present existence.

The trip to the post office generally used up the greater part of an afternoon, owing to an effort, too often futile, to secure the incoming mail and insure the posting of letters at the same time. The messenger who carried the Government pouch to and from Cheyenne on horseback was due at the Campbell ranch at about three o'clock; but as he was a gentleman little minded to become the slave of time, to hit the exact hour of his arrival required extreme nicety of calculation. It had come to be remarked at K 6 ranch, as an instance of the innate perversity of man, that if they happened at Campbell's ahead of time, the mail carrier was invariably late; while it appeared as inevitable that if they were late, the man had jogged along

Digitized by Google

his way, and their letters must lie in Mrs. Campbell's starch box—the sole official paraphernalia of the place—until the next mail day.

As a choice of evils they generally went early, and employed the surplus time in driving back and forth along the public road that ran by the Campbells' place. Occasionally they visited in unceremonious fashion the ranch next below, where they were blushingly made welcome by gingham-gowned ladies, tongue-tied with embarrassment; at other times they called upon Postmistress Campbell, whose gift of gab was rather more trying to Hugh than the amiable dumbness of her neighbours, so that he generally elected to stick by the carriage on these occasions, always declaring the trips for the mail an unmitigated nuisance.

On this day he had been out with his men all the morning, rounding up the horse herd, and he was very tired; moreover, he was boyishly eager to see Brown begin his work, and for once flatly refused to waste an afternoon in the drive over to Campbell's. Nelsine was nursing a headache and preferred to remain indoors; there appeared to be work for all the men about the place, and thus it was that Edith volunteered to ride to the post office alone.

"Look out for the mare," cautioned Hugh, as he lifted the girl into the saddle. "You will

Digitized by Google

need to keep a loose rein—her mouth is tender; but she will bear watching just the same." There was a clatter of hoofs on the bridge below as he spoke. "I told one of the boys to ride over and open the first gate for you," he added, in explanation of the sound. "You'll have to manage the rest of them yourself."

"And don't forget to ask Mrs. Campbell to loan us some baking powder," charged Nelsine from the piazza. "Talk about being ten miles from a lemon!—nobody knows, who has not tried it, what it means to be fifty miles from everything in a grocery store."

The mare started off with eager spring, delighted to be in motion in the fresh, pure air that exhilarated like wine. A light wind was blowing from the south, full of subtle sweetness caught from the breath of many flowers, scattering golden spangles over the polished leaves of the tossing branches, and braiding threads of silver among the down-combed billows of tall grass. A fairy fleet of rose petals was drifting along under the bridge, where the shallow water, dappled with sunshine, was like polished tortoise shell. Across the creek the road ran through thickets of wild roses, the vagrant bushes stretching out long, detaining arms that reached almost to the girl's waist as she rode, seeming as though they strove to hold her back to listen

Digitized by Google

to the hoarse murmur of the bees as they rifled the sweetness of the soft pink lips, carrying love's greeting from one heart of gold to another.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in a little crescendo of surprise, as she reined the unwilling horse by the opened gate, beside which the man who had been sent ahead sat upon his horse waiting. "Is it really you? I didn't suppose you had time for this sort of work, Mr. Brown."

"One can always find time for some things, Miss Ellery," he returned, with that flashing smile she so well remembered. "I was glad to take the opportunity to say, 'How do you do?' And are you finding ranch life as interesting as you expected?"

"Quite so, thanks," with some difficulty holding back the mare, impatient to be going. "And nothing has been more interesting than the glimpse of cowboy work that we had yesterday. It was very good of you to give us that exhibition of splendid riding. A bouquet gathered under such conditions gained a new charm."

"Oh, don't speak of it," he deprecatingly returned, yet flushing with pleasure. "One feels like an idiot, making a show of oneself in that way, but when Mr. Cameron asked it I

Digitized by Google

could hardly refuse; and then I thought if it would, perhaps, amuse you——"

"Amuse is hardly the word; it was delightful," she smilingly interrupted. "I was longing to ask you to give me riding lessons there and then."

"How kind of you to say so," he eagerly answered, his face aglow; "and, if you really mean it, of course, you know I shall be delighted at any time; though, indeed, you need no lessons."

"You will have little time for such interruptions, I fancy," she said hastily, curiously embarrassed by the look the suggestion had called to his face. "But thank you just the same; and thanks again for your trouble with the gate," looking back with a smiling nod as she gave the mare her head. "*Adiós!*"

She felt oddly stirred as she rode on across the plain and up through the little gulch to the mesa land beyond, where for a couple of miles the way ran as smooth as a race track. There were gates to open at intervals, but, for Nelsine's convenience when she rode alone, Hugh had placed a small stepping block on either side of each, so that Edith experienced no difficulty; and it seemed but a few moments before she found herself crossing Little Cow Creek. The flow of water here was scarcely less than found

Digitized by Google

its way between the banks of the sister of more imposing name; but in point of beauty the difference was very great. As far as the eye might follow, not a tree or shrub had found footing on the low, marshy banks; only a wind-blown stretch of wire grass tufted the black soil, from which swarms of deer flies and mosquitoes rose hungrily to greet the intruder. She was now upon the Campbell land, however, and it was not far to the gate that opened upon the bare square before the house.

Here was the plain prose of ranch life, the girl reflected, as, having dismounted to open the gate, she walked on, leading her horse. On a scantily grassed rise of ground, blotched with outcropping of pale yellow sandstone, stood the house, a low, flat-roofed building, seeming pathetically conscious of its own ugliness in the dress of weatherworn paint that was but a reminiscence of the pinkish gray it once had been. Nothing else was on this side of the square save a dishevelled wood pile and a few well-nigh downfallen poles supporting a clothesline, from which flapped a couple of dingy towels. Across the way, beside the rough mound forming the roof of a dugout cellar, stood a small building, obviously, from the broken wheels and bits of rusty machinery lying about, a tool house. Crowning the small hill beyond that was a

Digitized by Google

branding corral and cattle chute fenced in with slabs; while along that side by which Edith had come was ranged a line of unpainted and more or less dilapidated barns and sheds, flanked by a couple of corrals, whence the neighing of many horses called forth shrill response from the mare. Completing the fourth side of the square appeared the public road, crawling into view around the hill of the branding corral, when, meeting the bristling barrier of barbed wire inclosing the Campbell territory, it turned at an abrupt angle, following a section line straight across the country.

Mrs. Campbell stood hospitably waiting in the doorway, a woman with a shrewd, kindly face, on which a life of much hard work had plainly written its story. "The mail ain't here yet; but come right in," she called out. "Josiah is coming out to hitch for you, but he's always about as slow as molasses in January," the latter observation apparently accepted as rarest wit by her husband, who was pushing by her as she spoke.

"Man alive! But what a lot of letters you folks over at Big Cow Creek do write," he exclaimed, as Edith extracted the bulky package from the saddlebags.

"We want to make your office as remunerative as possible," the girl smilingly declared.

Digitized by Google

"Remunerative," repeated Mrs. Campbell, as though not altogether clear as to the meaning of the word. "Well, what I wish is that somebody would jest up and complain to the Government about that Sam Farrar. He's gettin' worse 'n' worse every blessed mail day. He'd ought to have been here by this; but, of course, he's had to stop somewheres along the road—swapping horses, most likely—'n' me settin' here a-waitin', too unsettled to even cut carpet rags—jest on the ragged edge of nothin', as you might say."

Edith laughed amusedly. They had passed inside, and it was, in fact, a rocking chair of most comfortable proportions into which the good woman's form was depositing itself.

"So you've got a new man over to your place—a horse breaker," she went on volubly, plainly delighted to have company. "Jim Kittery was a-tellin' us last night, when he rode over to see my boys about joinin' in with the K 6 outfit to go over to Cottonwood for a picnic, Fourth of July; but, land! I tell 'em it's a little early in the day to be plannin' picnics. I s'pose, though, Jim wants to invite Artalissa 'n' be sure of her. He's jest plum daft over that girl, now ain't he? He says the horse trainer—Brown is his name—was doin' a lot of fancy ridin' yesterday, puttin' on more airs than a

Digitized by Google

windmill in new paint. But—there!—I s'pose Artalissa has her eye on the new man already, and Jim is jest naturally jealous. The way she pulls the wool over their eyes!—it's enough to make a cat laugh; though her knack of bamboozlin' 'em into doin' her work for her ought to sicken the whole kit of 'em. She lived with me a spell last summer, when I was laid up with rheumatiz, 'n' 'twas worse than the rheumatiz to watch her! If she didn't get makin' eyes at Josiah!—to say nothin' of the boys, keepin' 'em all on the trot for her. She actually got Josiah down to peelin' potatoes! Land knows, I wish I knew the trick. He never done much potato peelin' for me. But she has a way with her to beat the Dutch. I s'pose she's gruntin' round now about havin' an extry man to do for, hintin' round to see if you 'n' Miss Ellery won't offer to wash the dishes 'n' help; but don't you offer; if you do, you'll be washin' dishes all summer; you'll never be let to quit."

Edith, smiling broadly, hastily disclaimed any intention of establishing a precedent so hazardous.

"I don't see how Miss Ellery stands her," the good woman went on reflectively. "But—there!—I s'pose she thinks it's Artalissa or nobody. Goodness knows what Miss Ellery would do if she was left to do for herself. She

Digitized by Google

jest looks as though the Lord had intended her to be packed in cotton and sprinkled over with perfumery; guess she *has* been kind of packed in cotton most of her life. But the general run of women don't have that kind of luck, Miss Ellery; leastwise not in the West. If she'd had some of the work I've had to do in my day—the land!—it would have jest broke her in two. This is a hard country on women 'n' horses, sure. The men do their work horseback, 'n' that's where the horses have to take it; but women have to do theirn afoot, 'n' the most of 'em are afoot pretty much all the time, so far as I've seen. But that Artalissa—she'll never hurt herself, I can tell you that."

"I had fancied her a very superior sort of a girl—rather above her position, in fact," Edith smilingly observed, delighting in her hostess's loquacity.

"Well, she thinks she's superior, at any rate," returned Mrs. Campbell, with an expressive sniff. "The way she parades her education jest makes me tired. When I hire a girl I'm willin' to treat her like one of the family, if she's the kind that deserves to be treated that way; but I don't want anybody around feelin' theirselves *better* than the family. It's wearin' on the nerves. 'N' then, Artalissa is such a shirk; though land knows she's smart enough if

Digitized by Google

she wants to be. In fact, I don't know but it's a kind of smartness that makes her so shirky; a person has jest naturally got to have a heap of brains to work other people the way she does. Oh, she's smart enough!"

"Gets that from her mother," supplemented Mr. Campbell, who had just established himself in another rocking chair. "Father wa'n't wuth a pinch of snuff—one of them kind of fellows jest natchelly born dead from the knees up; but the old woman was sharp as a tack. I knew the whole outfit, when I was livin' with my first wife, back in Nebrasky."

"She's dead," put in Mrs. Campbell parenthetically, as though she would promptly dispel any doubt as to the legitimacy of her position.

"Indeed," murmured Edith, choked with laughter.

"Land, yes; I remember Artalissa when she was hoofin' it 'round barefoot, without clothes enough to flag a hand car," went on Mr. Campbell reminiscently. "They used to say her mother had Injun blood in her, she was so dark complected; but she was a heap too smart for an Injun."

"If you'd see Artalissa when she's mad once, you'd think she had somethin' more than white blood in her," put in his wife, in a tone which said she knew whereof she spoke. "She has it

Digitized by Google

in her to be jest *pizen* ugly, for all the airs she puts on."

"But she's smart, jest the same, 'n' a figurer," the gentleman insisted. "'Tain't many girls of her age that's had the nerve to take up a homestead and pre-emption claim, 'n' get 'em both fenced, 'n' a good house 'n' barn on the place, all paid for out of her own earnin's."

"'N' I say it ain't natural for a girl of her age to be so forehanded," declared Mrs. Campbell implacably. "When a girl thinks as much of money as Artalissa does, I say she's got more head than heart. You may call it smart, but the way I look at it, it ain't natural 'n' it ain't wholesome."

Without Nelsine, who would always direct the conversation into channels of her own choosing, Edith found no little entertainment in the simple, unreflecting candour of these good people, which was fortunate, in view of the fact that never before had the mail carrier been so late. It was nearly six o'clock when he finally appeared, excusing the delay by the statement that his horse had gone lame some ten miles back, the apology accepted with palpable incredulity by Mrs. Campbell, although her amiable husband was prompt to fetch another animal to complete the unfortunate man's route.

The sun was low and the breath of night in

Digitized by Google

the air when Edith came again to Little Cow Creek. The crossing here had been a small bone of contention between the Campbells and Hugh Ellery. Since it was upon the Campbell land, Hugh had been reluctant to assume the whole cost of building a bridge, while the Campbells, having small use for the road, were slow to see why they should contribute to such an innovation for the benefit of their neighbours; and thus it was that so far the creek had remained unbridged. The swampy nature of the soil made it necessary to frequently choose new fords, the mire on either side becoming almost impassable as soon as the sustaining sod was well worn through, on which account the low land had become marked with a network of trails, quite confusing to a novice.

In coming from the higher bank of the other side it had been a comparatively simple matter to follow the latest tracks; but where she now was, among the devious ways threading the tall grasses, Edith found herself halting undecidedly. There was something curiously oppressive about the loneliness of the place. The Campbell buildings were hidden behind a line of low sandstone bluffs, and as far as the eye might see the desolation was unrelieved. Vague white vapours joined hands over the marshy soil like a gathering of lost souls, while

Digitized by Google

dank odours rose from the black ooze into which the mare's feet pressed with sucking sounds. A damp whiff, chill as a greeting from the dead, sent a shiver through the girl's body; and, impatient to be away from the place, she touched the mare with the whip, leaving it to animal instinct to choose the way. Each led as unerringly in the one direction as the roads of old turned toward Rome, and the girl reflected that the number, after all, meant little more than Hugh's caprices as a driver.

But of a sudden she was to discover that in trusting to horse sense she had made a fatal error. The animal had plunged into a pool of black mud, going the deeper with every movement, while Edith, terrified beyond reason by thought of quicksands, striking blindly with her whip, but induced the wilder struggles, until she had much ado to keep her seat. The mare was up to her middle now, the seething ooze clinging like filthy, malodorous jelly, while the girl, sick and faint, felt that they were being drawn down as by an irresistible force. Seconds seemed hours, until she became conscious of a bit of sod not far from her feet, a tiny mud-splashed clump of grass, hardly larger than a tea plate, but it might support her weight, while from it to the farther bank was but a couple of feet. To think was to act in such extremity.

Digitized by Google

Loosening her foot from the stirrup and gathering up her muddy skirt, with lips pressed determinedly together and a face very white, she jumped, happily gaining the coveted point of vantage. It sank somewhat under her weight, inducing ill-considered haste in the second leap, so that she sank over her ankles in mud. But a moment later she had scrambled upon solid ground, weak and trembling, but otherwise none the worse, save for a very disreputable little pair of shoes. Relieved of her weight and no longer embarrassed by the frantic tugging at the rein, the mare promptly floundered out of the bog, and, with a joyous shake that sent a foul shower flying in all directions, started off at a lope up the hill, wholly heedless of the girl's imploring "Whoa!"

The situation was far from cheering, a walk of no less than three miles seeming inevitable, unless the unruly animal consented to be overtaken, of which there was small hope. There was a possibility that there might be a halt at the first gate, but the field was large, and the chances seemed equal that the mare's fancy might turn her in any direction. Edith hurried resolutely up the hill, the way steep and made up of sand interspersed with much gravel that hurt her feet, while the high altitude became painfully evident in the labour of breathing.

Digitized by Google

How hot it was, and how breathlessly still! She untied the veil that was wound around face and neck, removing the stiff hat that was like a helmet of iron upon her head, stopping to recover breath and wipe the perspiration from her face. And then an unreasoning terror, born of the awful loneliness, fastened itself upon her. On the heights at the right were some crumbling sandstone cliffs, blotched with openings that Nelsine had once pointed out as wolf dens; and Edith's glance was fixed upon these with a sort of shuddering fascination, half expecting to catch the glare of evil eyes among the shadows. The sighing of the wind seemed burdened with all the desolation of earth. The rolling pebbles loosened by her footsteps stirred her heart to a panic of foolish beating; and she stopped short, with a little nervous scream, when presently a new sound broke upon her ear. It was clearly hurrying hoof beats, and she looked to see which way she might run, should it prove to be some of the wild cattle of which she was in such deadly fear. At the same time it occurred to her that it might be the truant mare, turned back in some caprice; and thus divided between hope and fear, ready to fly to the nearest barbed wire fence at the first danger signal, she stood waiting, when, at breakneck speed, Paul Brown came riding over the hill, leading the runaway

Digitized by Google

mare. With a sense of relief inexpressible, she waved her hand in greeting, but there was no answering smile upon his face.

"In Heaven's name, how did it happen?" he exclaimed, as he threw himself from his horse. "And are you hurt?"

"Not a bit of it," she returned, laughing at his concern, while she went on to explain the mishap. "But what a blessed bit of luck that you happened along!" she gratefully added. "I was beginning to be almost frightened in this eerie solitude. It seems just the kind of a place for 'the gobble'uns to git you ef you don't watch out.'"

"I didn't exactly happen along," he dryly returned. "Mrs. Ellery seemed anxious when you did not return, and, as I happened to be saddled up, I rode over to see if anything had gone wrong. And when I found the mare back there by the fence, well"—drawing a sharp breath, while Edith surprisedly noted a sort of yellow pallor under his sunburned skin—"well, I rode a little faster the rest of the way."

"And so Mrs. Ellery sent you to find me," the girl rather confusedly rejoined. "Well, if she is anxious, we would better hurry. Will you help me to mount, please?"

"Pardon me; I did not say that I had been sent: I simply came," he laughed, when he had

Digitized by Google

given his hand to the small foot and she was again in the saddle. "But—excuse me—your shoes are covered with mud. Shall I wipe them off for you with a wisp of grass?"

"Oh, no, indeed; it is not of the slightest consequence," she hastily returned, unreasonably blushing at the suggestion. "And we must be getting back to the ranch."

"I wonder that your brother lets you go about the country by yourself this way," he disapprovingly observed, as they rode side by side up the hill.

"He never has let me before; that is, I have never wanted to. But I am sure it is perfectly safe."

"Safe!—when you have just been mired."

"But I ought to have kept out of the mire. There is plenty of firm ground to cross upon, if only I had taken pains to pick the way. I don't know what my brother will say when he hears of it."

"I hope he will say that you are never to go alone again," returned Brown, the tone laughing, yet altogether earnest. "He could certainly always spare a man to go, even if he could not take the time himself. For that matter, I should be pleased to volunteer for the duty at any time, Miss Ellery," this last with an audacious glance full in her eyes.

Digitized by Google

"Thank you," she rather stiffly answered, turning away her head; "but I fancy you will have little time for that sort of thing. You are going to be very busy, are you not?"

"Rather busy; yes."

"My brother is sorry that you can stay so short a time," she went on, in confused impulse to make talk.

"Well, I am sorry too," he laughed, a gleam of odd significance seeming in his swift glance. "In fact, now that I am here, I feel as though a straw's weight of argument might be enough to make me stay—if it came from the right source."

"What a beautiful horse you have!" Edith irrelevantly rejoined, not knowing why she blushed. "I think I never saw a finer."

"He is about as good a specimen of the evolution of the bronco as you will be likely to run across," the young fellow answered, his face lighting as he leaned forward to pat the shining neck. "There is a good strain of Morgan blood in him, though—his redemption. Most of these Western horses, you know, are rather like what John Randolph said of the soil of Virginia: 'poor by nature and ruined by cultivation.'"

"This one has such an easy, graceful gait. He seems simply perfect."

"Would you like to ride him, Miss Ellery?"

Digitized by Google

Brown eagerly exclaimed. "I shall be using him hardly at all while I am here, you know, and you can have him at any time."

"Why, thank you," she murmured confusedly, recalling what Cameron had said in respect to the jealous monopoly of the horse. "But is he safe for a woman?"

"No woman ever has ridden him," he reluctantly admitted, "but I could train him in an hour so that you could feel perfectly safe on his back. Indeed, it would be the greatest pleasure, Miss Ellery. Somebody ought to exercise him, really."

"You are very kind," she murmured demurely, "but I understood Mr. Cameron to say that you did not like to have other people ride your horse."

"There are people—and people."

"And I think you just remarked that you did not approve of my riding alone," she went on, a glint of mischief in her smile.

"And I don't know that I proposed your riding alone," he daringly answered her. "Perhaps I was audacious enough to remember that earlier in the day you were good enough to tell me that you would like me to give you riding lessons. It would be a case of gilding refined gold and painting the lily, to be sure; but please don't think that I am lacking in willingness."

Digitized by Google

"You are quite too kind," she declared, a touch of sarcasm in the tone; irrelevantly adding, "Suppose we try a race from here to the gate."

There was little opportunity for further speech in their swift course across the hard road of the mesa land; but when he had dismounted to open the last gate, she drew rein beside him for a moment, saying, with a sudden smiling sweetness, "I have not thanked you yet for coming to the rescue—for the second time. You saved me from a very bad quarter of an hour."

"There is no occasion for thanks. You know that I was only too glad to come," he quickly returned. "Indeed, it is I who should say 'Thank you' for a very good quarter of an hour, Miss Ellery."

As she rode on into the shade of the box elders it suddenly occurred to Edith that a disagreeable and wholly unaccountable habit of blushing was growing upon her, something that will power should remedy.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VI

THE reign of repose had passed away, and "the place where nothing ever happened," as Nelsine plaintively enjoyed describing her ranch home to remote correspondents, was now a scene of stir and hurry that filled every hour of the day with vivid interest.

The family was regularly awakened by the beating of hoofs on the grass-padded earth, as the horse herd was driven in from outside pastures; and several times Nelsine and Edith were tempted out in the fresh, dew-washed air, to watch the initial performance of the day. This, the cutting out from the herd of some eighteen or twenty horses for the day's work, involving much "throwing of the twine," in cowboy slang, was full of excitement for all concerned. At the first touch of the rope, an animal that had never yet felt the touch of human hand was always driven mad with terror, frequently dragging the captor around the corral, with no little rude jostling, before the rope could be safely twisted around the stout "snubbing post" in the centre of the ground. If the animal hap-

Digitized by Google

pened to be especially vicious, he was driven into the narrow chute of slabs, or thrown to the ground and hobbled, until sufficiently subdued to permit the hackamore halter of rope to be slipped in place. It was at this point of the proceedings that Paul Brown's magnetic influence over the animal seemed especially in evidence. Once the hackamore was in place, he would begin in a soothing monotone, as one would quiet a fractious child: "Now, then, little one—poor little fellow!—don't be frightened; it's all right," murmuring the simple sentences over and over again, until, to its own surprise, as it seemed, the trembling creature was being led about the corral, seeming powerless to resist the subtle charm of voice and eye. And next the saddle was upon his back, and subjection was almost complete.

"It is the iron hand in the velvet glove," Nelsine remarked, looking over the fence. "It seems, when once he lays his finger upon them, they can do nothing but yield."

"But the mesmeric influence doesn't seem exactly final," laughed Edith, watching, with a sort of unwilling admiration, the stalwart figure combatting the struggles of a colt that was frantically repelling the torture of the "bitting rig."

"And the horse will be avenged eventually," Hugh comfortably observed between the puffs

Digitized by Google

of a cigar. "The average of life with these fellows is but seven years after they are started on that kind of work. For a while they go on, conquering and to conquer, so to speak; but sooner or later each meets his little Waterloo. He gets a bad tumble that injures him internally; he develops a kidney trouble, or something in that line, and, the first thing he knows, he is riding a horse of another colour 'over the range.' It is a hard way to make a living."

"It seems hard on both man and beast," Edith rejoined, with a touch of indignation in her voice. "How can he treat the poor creature so?—its mouth is bleeding from that wicked bit. Oh!"—giving a scream of terror—"he will be killed!"

The colt was charging blindly around the narrow confines of the corral, kicking and striking in a frenzy of ugliness. Whatever the apparent peril of his position, Brown found time to wheel around with a reassuring smile as he heard that little scream; then, seizing a rope, a loop had left his hand on the instant, and straightway the animal was lying on its side, enveloped in a thick cloud of dust. There was quick work now, all hands hurrying to assist, lest the colt should become so entangled in the lariat as to injure himself. Presently, trembling but still showing fight, he was forced upon his feet

Digitized by Google

again; and now Paul Brown was bending over him with his low-toned, caressing words, always cool and unruffled, while soon the cowed creature had submitted to the inevitable, and the "bitting rig" was in place, although the head incessantly tossed from side to side, and the wildly appealing eyes told how keen was the torment.

"I think Mrs. Campbell is right," Edith observed with some acrimony. "This is a hard country on women and horses."

"With the uncertainty of cooks, I think the women have decidedly the worst of it," rejoined Nelsine plaintively. "It is dish-washing and potato-peeling that puts the 'bitting rig' in a woman's mouth and breaks her spirit forever."

"It does not seem to have broken the spirit of our Nebraska schoolma'am," put in Hugh, with a lazy laugh. "I saw her coyly repulsing Jim's attentions this morning, by throwing a stick of wood after him."

"And she gave the new man pie for breakfast; I saw the remains as I came through the kitchen," supplemented Nelsine pathetically. "It gave me a regular chill. I have so often seen the results of that sort of thing."

They stopped to order breakfast served as they passed the pantry window, on the other side of which Artalissa was moulding bread.

Digitized by Google

"Can you see the little circus from here?" Mrs. Ellery asked pleasantly, disposed to be especially gracious, in view of the haunting possibility of losing the girl.

"I've got too much to do to be watching a lot of fool colts, let alone making that man Brown more conceited than ever," was the sullen rejoinder, as the strong fists sunk heavily into the white mound of dough. "He's stuck up enough now, goodness knows; though that is most generally the way with these good-looking fellows," the last in more amiable tone.

"He *is* good-looking, isn't he?" rejoined Mrs. Ellery, with a charming air of unconsciousness.

"H'm! I've seen some enough sight handsomer," Artalissa declared, darting a glance at Miss Ellery's dainty, lace-trimmed, much beribboned white gown, as she added: "Handsome is as handsome does, *I* say."

"Oh, certainly; and I hope you will whisper your opinion to Jim," laughed Nelsine rather nervously, anxious to wheedle the girl out of her obviously bad temper. "I fear the poor fellow sadly needs consolation since the new man has arrived."

Artalissa simpered and bridled, looking mollified and disgusted in a breath. "He's got no business needing anything, so far as I'm con-

Digitized by Google

cerned," she declared. "I wouldn't have *him* if he was made of solid gold from head to foot, and as big as an elephant to boot."

"Well, were he such a freak as that, I should hope not," laughed Mrs. Ellery, as they turned away. "But what a touchy thing she is!" she vexedly added, when they were well beyond range of the window. "Was it because we kept breakfast waiting that she was in such a temper?"

"More likely it was a spirit of envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness, roused by the fact that we had leisure to watch proceedings at the corral, 'making that man Brown more conceited than ever,'" returned Edith, with a certain tightening about the lines of her mouth. "Of course you observe that your fears are verified: she is in love with the horse trainer."

"Oh, do you think so?" exclaimed Nelsine, seeming loath to accept the statement after all.

"I am sure of it."

"Well, if that is the case, of course she will marry him," as though hopelessly washing her hands of the whole business. "But Heaven forbid!"

"Oh, Heaven never forbids," Edith dryly declared. "Heaven is given over to the making of marriages, you know."

Digitized by Google

The general build and natural tendency of a colt determined whether it was to be made a "driver" or a "saddler." In the former case, once broken to bit and bridle, the young animal was harnessed to the stout breaking cart, in company with a staid old horse or mule, and the ill-matched pair traversed the road across the creek until the tyro had learned the philosophy of yielding to the inevitable. But terrific was the kicking and plunging upon occasion; while frequently the animal would lie down in the road, flatly refusing to budge, until wheedling or whip induced a change of mind. But far more exciting it was to watch the first experiments with the saddle, the untried colts always madly resenting the lightest touch upon their backs.

Rarely a morning passed that Nelsine and Edith did not stroll up to the corral to watch this rough play, while the latter took snap shots at the horse in every possible attitude and manœuvre, the horse breaker naturally included. There was always a new wonder at the adroit movements that could so quickly have the saddle cinched upon the struggling creature, its kicking and striking always a menace to all within reach. Then followed a moment of breathless interest, when Brown crept upon his victim with a lithe movement hardly to be no-

Digitized by Google

ticed until one foot was in the stirrup, when in a flash the other leg would fly over the saddle, and the rider was seated, as immovably fixed as a Centaur. Instantly the surprised and outraged animal was kicking and plunging and bucking at such rate as made the man's cool poise seem fairly miraculous. But Paul Brown was " right there every time," as the boys would remark in their own vernacular; and when the animal's head and heels were meeting together in a haze of dust, almost suggesting a fear that some of the parts might fly off from centrifugal force, the rider was the one object in the *mêlée* to appear distinctly unmoved. After a wild dash or two about the corral, at a sign from Brown the gate would be thrown open, and away they would go as though shot from a catapult, flying down across the lawn, over the bridge and straight across the bottom land to the mesa beyond, the steep climb up the *coulée* there having generally such subduing effect that presently the animal would be ambling back at a gait proclaiming a well-nigh broken spirit.

It was Brown's custom to ride or drive each animal himself until its first wildness had been worn off, when it was turned over to an assistant working under his direction; and thus at intervals all day long a racing procession passed over

Digitized by Google

the bridge, continually stirring up new currents of excitement. Unhappy hens, perversely bent on feeding about the confines of the corral, contributed regularly to the turmoil, as they scattered with cackling clamour before each new onslaught; while the little boys enlivened proceedings by shrilly announcing each change in the program over and over, like a Greek chorus, until nobody about the place could by any possibility have been left in ignorance of all that was going on. In fact, for the time being the whole ranch was completely given over to the business of horse breaking, the doings of Brown and his cohorts the one unfailing theme of conversation.

Edith was seated on the lawn one morning, assuming to read, although the book had dropped to her lap forgotten, while her eyes followed a moving spot upon the gray-green expanse across the creek. It was Paul Brown, coming back from a wild dash across the country on the back of an animal that seemed no more to be conquered than original sin. As she looked she was recalling Hugh's words of the other day: seven years was the average of a life like that. In but such a little while, according to that grisly law of the average, this man would have passed on to the realm of explanations, to find out, perhaps, why God had let him thus

Digitized by Google

squander his rich gift of life. However bravely he rode to-day, in the long run it was to prove but a losing race with Death.

He saw her as he crossed the bridge, raising his hat with the careless grace that, almost more than any other one thing about him, seemed to reveal the training of a gentleman. Perhaps it was this movement that startled the colt; possibly the vicious brute had been but summoning strength for a new *coup;* however it was, swerving violently to the left as his feet left the bridge, the crazed creature made straight up the rise of lawn toward the spot where Edith was standing, glued to the spot with surprise and terror. Just beyond the girl, but somewhat nearer the creek, a tree had fallen in one of the late spring storms, its top still alive and clothed in a mass of greenery that had become interwoven with the branches of a couple of cottonwoods against which it was leaning. There was just time to see that Brown was pulling furiously at the bit, and to no purpose, when horse and rider had passed her by, making directly for the fallen tree. For an instant Edith closed her eyes, feeling as if Death stood before her. But the man's presence of mind was equal to the occasion. As the animal plunged under the leaning trunk, the rider's hands grasped the branches above, swinging him clear from the saddle, to drop to the

Digitized by Google

ground an instant later wholly unharmed. The colt, blindly miscalculating, had become wedged, held by the saddle horn, from which plight he was released by a couple of the boys who came running down from the barn.

When this had been accomplished, Paul Brown walked over to where Edith was standing. "I hope you were not frightened, Miss Ellery," he said, his courtesy seeming the more strained and mechanical for the feeling that swept over him in noting her pallor.

"Oh, I never saw anything so dreadful in my life!" she exclaimed, with a shudder. "Why do you do it?—how can you?"

"But I didn't do it, Miss Ellery," he protested, with a laugh that seemed palpably forced. "Don't blame me, please; it was all the doings of the colt."

"But the danger of such a life!" she urged eagerly. "Why will you take such chances? It is hardly less than suicide."

"As to that," he returned, with a careless shrug, "men must work, Miss Ellery; and, in my case, there are no women to weep. If I had chanced to get my head knocked off just now—well, it would have been one less horse trainer in the world; but he would hardly have been missed: there are others. It might have been a little inconvenient for your brother just now,

Digitized by Google

probably, in view of the work he wants done; rather shocking for Mrs. Ellery, as occurring on her pretty lawn; and for you——"

"Well, and what as to me?" she asked, as he hesitated, looking up with a shade of defiance for something in his tone.

"You, Miss Ellery—why, it would have given you another subject for your camera, don't you know?" he said, with a short, sardonic laugh. "I thought of that as I hung there—like a jumping jack waiting to be cut down from a Christmas tree; I wondered if you were seizing the opportunity to add to your collection of snap shots."

Already shaken and unnerved, the girl's anger flamed up instantly. "Am I to understand from that that you have not liked being photographed so often?" she demanded, her cheeks flushed red with wrath. "To be sure, in taking the horses it would have been hard to leave you out, but perhaps I should have begged permission to leave you in."

"By no means, Miss Ellery; I have been highly honoured. I only meant to imply——"

"Well, I should be very pleased to know just what you meant to imply," she said, as he hesitated, a dangerous sweetness in the laboured courtesy of her tone.

"Merely that Miss Ellery's interest—if she

Digitized by Google

will excuse my saying it—in the case of her brother's horse trainer could not possibly extend beyond her camera."

"And I can imagine no possible reason why it should," she tartly returned, hardily meeting his glance. "And as to the camera, since I infer that it has given annoyance, you need be under no further apprehensions. You shall not be troubled by even the impertinent interest of snap shots from this time forth; indeed," she added, dazzlingly pretty in the glow of her wrath, "if it would give you the smallest satisfaction, I shall be only too happy to destroy every one that I have."

"Ah, now you are cruel," he murmured; but, with head held loftily erect, the young lady had sailed by him into the house.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VII

It was Sunday at K 6 ranch, as in many professedly Christian households the longest day of the week.

There were morning prayers in the dining room, supplemented by a brief sermon of Mrs. Ellery's selection, which her husband obediently read. To this service everybody on the place was invited, and even urged to be present by the zealous lady of the house; but as Hugh felt that attendance should not be made compulsory, he was regularly confronted with evidence that he performed a somewhat thankless office. The majority of the men preferred to avail themselves of the leisure the day afforded for hunting, or visiting expeditions around the neighbouring ranches; while, even if they remained at home, they were so prone to ignore the bidding to the dining room that Hugh, in disgust, would have been moved to abandon all efforts for a flock so recalcitrant but for Nelsine's insistence. As it was, whatever the possibilities of good in the service for others, certain it seemed that its conditions always induced a distinct ill humour in

Digitized by Google

poor Hugh's honest soul, illy assuaged by smoking more cigars than were good for him, as he wrestled with the accumulated newspapers and periodicals of the week. Nelsine, under the impression that she was righteously resting, always wrote more letters on this day than on any other—an occupation considerably hindered by the children, who, perhaps because of disjointed hours for meals, or possibly for very *ennui*, invariably chose this time to be especially fractious and troublesome.

Now it was afternoon, and the little mother was anxiously toiling through the hour of religious instruction she conceived it her duty to bestow upon her offspring. A nervous frown showed between her eyes as she turned the leaves of a book of Bible tales, supposed to be especially adapted to meet the requirements of the infant mind, but which seemed utterly without interest for the wriggling youngsters, who perpetually shifted their leaning weight from their mother's shoulders to her knees, all the while searching their small pockets for counter entertainment.

"Now, Ralph, listen to mamma," she said, impressively appealing to her firstborn. "Tell mamma what is the difference between Sundays and other days." There was no immediate response. The children were absorbed in the gyra-

Digitized by Google

tions of a bee bumping at the window in misguided effort to enter.

"Oh, yes; I know!" cried the urchin in a sudden splutter, catching a danger signal in his mother's eye. "Ice cream for dinner, mamma," a note of triumph and conscious merit in the tone, for having so quickly hit upon the distinguishing feature. "An' I say, ma-r-ma, can't we go out an' scrape the freezer? I know there was a lot left." There was an irrelevant little scream from the harassed mother.

"Roy, you have stepped upon mamma's foot!" she cried, solicitously chafing the daintily slippered member. "How can you be such a heedless child?"

"An' what do you say, Roy, when you run onto folks an' step on 'em?" piped Ralph, anxiously nudging the younger to a proper sense of duty. "You'd better be p'lite—an' be quick about it, too—or we won't get out till the ice cream is all melted."

"O ma-r-ma, much 'bliged—don't mention it—I mean, you're welcome!" cried the small culprit, recalling his various lessons in etiquette, and altogether in a panic for the awful possibility suggested.

Nelsine put down the foot with a small groan, while Edith fled precipitately to give vent to her laughter. Hugh lay asleep in a ham-

Digitized by Google

mock on the piazza, a newspaper over his face. A Sabbath stillness seemed to hold all the place. The subdued murmur of insect life suggested rest rather than the common note of toil; while now and then, as it seemed, a babbling note of inquiry broke from the birds, as if they asked what had happened that the work of the world had ceased. From the fields at the west came a wave of perfume more exquisite than chemist has ever yet caught in his bottles, sweet contribution of acres of purpling alfalfa; while over the feathery bloom a shoal of yellow butterflies, like flowers broken loose from their stems, floated languorously in the warm embrace of the breeze.

She slipped quietly to her room, securing hat and gloves, retreating then through the kitchen to her favourite walk up the creek. The narrow trail was as the feet of cattle had worn it around the steep hill at the west of the barns, keeping well to the valley, where wild roses, tall spikes of creamy yucca, flaunting sunflowers, and a riot of primroses, lupines, and astragali, mocked with their lawless bloom the purple plumes of alfalfa tamely massed beyond the barbed wire confine at the left. A little way and the course of the river encircled the alfalfa field, creeping to the very foot of the flower-strewn hillside, the water here pent up by a beaver dam into a wide, drowsy pool, its surface just faintly stirring with

Digitized by Google

the wind, like the breath of a sleeping babe. As a finger on its lip saying "Hush!" the reflection of a dead tree fell in a clear, gray-white line; and lush green things spread their leaves on the shallows in a coverlet embroidered with threads of gold.

Farther on, the river made another detour, leaving bare a long crescent of the valley land, upon which a young forest of rank growth had established itself. Now, coming from the brilliant sunshine, it seemed a soft green twilight under the thickly interlaced boughs of cottonwood and box elder; and the wild roses, of which there were many, were wan and pale as funeral wreaths. Soft harmonies that weirdly thrilled the nerves whispered among the treetops, with now and then a sharp, crackling note of discord, as though a string of the wind harp might have broken; and of a sudden, with a startling whir, came a jack rabbit, making for nowhere in a scatter-brained panic. Edith sprang aside, her heart standing still, and then, in unreasoning impulse of imitation, found herself running a little way, presently emerging upon the open hillside beyond, breathless with foolish laughter.

Here she could sink restfully upon the ground, looking up the green valley where the flash of the creek shone out in many a twist and

Digitized by Google

turn, like a chain of jewels thrown down in the lap of the meadows. Strange, pungent smells from the marshy borders of the creek mingled with subtle whiffs of flower fragrance as in a tangled skein; and the rustling of the trees behind sounded in soft murmur like a conch shell held at the ear. The light wind touched the girl's cheek like a caress, playing with the loose strands of hair as with the lingering tenderness of a lover.

Inexpressible was the restfulness of it to her troubled heart. It seemed to her fancy that she might perchance, if she listened well, catch here from the voice of Nature an answer to the query with which for four-and-twenty hours her soul had been fretted. A letter received from Marshall Woodbury the day before had told her that he was shortly to pass through Denver on a hurried business trip to California. He could illy spare the time to turn aside into the wilds of Wyoming to find her, and begged that she would hasten the visit he knew she planned to make to her friend, Mrs. Hallet, in Denver, and so give him the joy of seeing her. With the fatuous confidence of a lover, he had gone on to say that when they met he hoped to read in the first glance of her dear eyes an answer to the question he had asked a month ago. Edith frowned impatiently, as for the hundredth time she re-

Digitized by Google

peated the words in her mind. It seemed to her that in thus assuming to cut short the period for which she had stipulated he was guilty of nothing less than breach of faith. But while in petulant mood she was inclined to say him nay, she found her position complicated by the fact that already she had arranged to be in Denver at the very time of his appointment. Mrs. Hallet had written urging her to come before the city's heat became intolerable, and fearing delay might involve inconvenience or disappointment for that charming hostess, she had readily acceded to the wish. But this letter had filled her with perverse desire to change the plan. If she went now, she told herself, it would seem to Marshall Woodbury as simply because he asked it; from that point of view he might assume anything; and while but the other day she had been minded to abridge of her own accord the time of doubt and dalliance, she was now capriciously angry that concession should seem to be wrested from her. It did not once occur to her that had real love been in her heart she must instinctively have yielded to his wish and gloried in the yielding; that with any smallest glow of passion's fire she could not have faltered in the going to meet the love-light in his eyes once more. She had yet to learn that there can be no love worthy the name

Digitized by Google

without the quickening of desire, the longing for nearness and possession, insistent and impelling.

She turned with a start at a slight sound behind, to see Paul Brown hurrying down the hill. "O Miss Ellery, is it really you? I am so glad that I happened to meet you!" he rather breathlessly exclaimed, as he came near; and it was not until afterward that Edith reflected that a person at the barns, seeing her go by, might easily have taken the trail over the hills in hurrying pursuit, so as to make the happening a matter for much less surprise than this young man made such a point of exhibiting. "I have been wanting to see you so much," he went on eagerly, "to apologize for my rudeness the other day."

The girl had risen and stood staring at him icily. "The other day," she slowly repeated, as though making an effort to remember.

"In regard to the photographs," he hurriedly explained, evidently taken aback by the chill rebuff of her manner.

"Oh, that!" she exclaimed, with an airy little smile. "Don't speak of it, Mr. Brown. I had entirely forgotten it; and, indeed, it was not of the very slightest consequence."

"To you, Miss Ellery, probably not," he returned; "but to me it was of the very great-

Digitized by Google

est consequence. It has made me miserable ever since."

"What?" she drawled with a rising inflection, opening her eyes very wide. "Why, how perfectly absurd! I can assure you that I have never given it a moment's thought." Thus the best of women may fib upon occasion. "And, of course, you know, if you did not want to be photographed"—a subtle sting in the laboured sweetness of the tone—"it was perfectly right that you should let me know."

"But I did wish it—I was only too glad," he protested. "I was delighted that you were taking away something that, when you had gone East again, might make you think of me now and then whether you wanted to or not. I would have posed for you from morning till night, and thanked Heaven for the opportunity, But the other day—how can I explain it?—the blue devils had possession of me. Can't you imagine what a man must sometimes feel in a position like mine?—held down by barriers as inexorable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians?"

"But have you any right to complain?" she asked, as he paused, the gently remonstrant tone yet sounding hard. "Aren't the conditions of your life just what you have made them?"

"Yes; and that is the worst of it," he bitter-

Digitized by Google

ly answered her. "It is the legitimate way of the transgressor; but to say that it is right is not to make it any easier to bear."

"How did it happen?" demanded the girl impulsively, something in his look calling a sudden, pitying softness to her eyes; "I mean, that you are here and—what you are," the last added in some confusion, as he looked at her in heavy-eyed inquiry.

"Would you really like to know? Have you interest enough in it to let me tell you?" he eagerly exclaimed, his face brightening. "Nobody about here knows my little story, or, indeed, that there is a story to know. I have tried to forget it myself; but it would be a pleasure to tell it to you, if you would listen. And if you knew, perhaps you might be a little more just to me."

"I did not think that I had been unjust," she murmured, glancing about uncertainly, curiosity and discretion at war in her mind. "And it is growing late." Then, after another moment of hesitancy, curiosity triumphed, and she added, "but I can give you a few minutes, if you like."

"Thank you so much," the tone eloquent of keen satisfaction. "And will you sit down?—thanks again," choosing a seat at her feet. "And now—what shall I tell you?"

Digitized by Google

"It is for you to say; but I thought it was to be the story of your life."

"It is a poor little story, and not altogether a pleasant one," he said slowly, his eyes fixed upon her face with a sort of wistful questioning. "Perhaps you will think it hardly worth the telling."

"Oh, if you would rather leave it untold——"

"But I shall be glad, as I told you before; and even if I were not—" hesitating, with a short laugh, "well, Miss Ellery, don't you know it would be a small price to pay for the pleasure of sitting here with you like this?"

"Oh, if you are only going to pay me silly compliments——" she cried, in an offended tone, making as though she would rise.

"But I am not, I give you my word," he hastened to declare, genuinely alarmed at the movement. "I will be as barely civil as you can ask, if you will only stay. I will even apologize over and over again for that ill-advised break; anything to be forgiven."

"Perhaps one apology will do," she murmured with a smile, convinced that she ought to be offended at the fellow's audacity, yet, rather to her own surprise, seeming irresistibly impelled to resume her seat and listen; "that

Digitized by Google

is, if you remember that I am not waiting here to listen to nonsense of that sort."

"I shall only remember how kind you are to listen at all, Miss Ellery; I may say so much, may I not? But I will certainly try not to offend again. And now, shall I return to my *moutons?*"

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER VIII

"It is the story of another prodigal, you must know," he began, after a moment, looking up with a faint, sardonic smile; "only in this case the swine, as a rule, have refused to divide, and there is no finale of veal."

"It will be so much the more interesting," she lightly declared. "It will be unique."

"Well, then, once upon a time—to begin like a fairy tale—there was a freckle-faced kid, who, by all the laws of heredity, should have been born with a halo around his head—but didn't happen to be. My mother was as near an angel as women ever are on earth, while my father—well, there never was a better man than my father, Miss Ellery. The only trouble was that he was *too* good. Perhaps you have known saints, who for their very sanctity were simply scourges to the everyday sinners that had to live with them."

"Yes," she agreed, a shade of anxiety in her glance. Was he going to tell her that his sin had been so very black?

"I believe I was dedicated to the ministry

Digitized by Google

before I was born, so that from the very outset I found myself a round peg in a square hole, so to speak. I was expected to develop traits in harmony with the high calling for which I was designed, while, through some freak of atavism, I was simply brimming over with deviltry of all sorts. As to being a minister—I hated the cloth with all the fervour of my wicked little soul, charging at their door all the torments of the Sunday *régime* I was called to endure. I believe my father was fond of me in his way; but he was a cold, reserved man, and his theories as to the proper training of the young idea, with his pride and ambition for me, made him seem nothing less than tyrannical to my mind. That all work and no play might make Jack a dull boy had no part in his theory of education, and I grew up with a sullen sense of injury, almost loathing the religion that seemed crushing out all the joys of life beneath its Juggernaut wheels. The result was as might have been expected. When I went to college, the first taste of freedom turned my head; and—well, my record was not one to be proud of."

"I suppose you were not the only man of your class who might say the same," she remarked, as he hesitated.

"No; there were others," he admitted, with a dry laugh; "but I doubt if there was one who

Digitized by Google

walked to his downfall over such a macadam of broken promises. My father had not had a college education, although, from much reading and travel, he was a very cultured man; but he lacked the experience that would have made it possible for him to comprehend college life from the collegian point of view. In particular he was down on baseball, football, and boating as only leading to idleness and the vice of betting; while even more than these, I believe, he abhorred all secret societies; and so with ball and boating and all college societies I was solemnly pledged to have nothing to do. Of course, smoking and drinking preceded all else in the catalogue of mustn'ts. I was an idiot to bind myself with promises so unconditionally; but I had almost no option. My father was accustomed to lay down the law, and I had been trained in acquiescence. To openly rebel had never entered my mind. All the same, though, a promise is a promise, and I ought to have been man enough to stick by mine when once it had been given; but I wasn't. The fact was that I was a tremendously muscular young fellow, taking to athletics as naturally as a duck to water, while it would appear that morally I was counterbalancingly weak. At all events, one by one the promises went awreck."

"But surely your father was unreasonable

Digitized by Google

in making such demands upon you," Edith exclaimed. "He was as bad as the mother of the song, who tells the darling daughter who wants to swim, to hang her clothes on a hickory limb, but not to go near the water. To send a boy to college and expect him not to play ball is preposterous."

"I quieted my conscience by thinking so at the time; but however plausible the reasoning, it did not save me from the proverbial way of the transgressor. Probably father gauged my capacity better than I did, and knew that I couldn't serve two masters. At any rate, although I improved my stroke that year to a point of which I was not a little proud, and compassed a high jump that broke the whole class record, I went home loaded down with conditions that kept me digging all summer, while my moral tone was hardly bettered by the effort to contrive fairy tales to cover the real cause of my disgrace. It was a lesson to me, though, and I went back that fall full to the gunwale of good resolutions—that lasted about a week. Then it happened, in an emergency, that I was persuaded to take an oar in our class crew; and after that it seemed hardly 'steen minutes before I found myself regularly pulling stroke, and so proud of the greatness thrust upon me as to be fairly reckless of consequences. And with my

Digitized by Google

laurels came stronger pressure to join one of the college societies. By this time I had arrived at the conclusion that I might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, and I chose to join the best—and most expensive. From this it was but a step to find myself in debt up to my ears, put to my very wit's end to get money enough to keep along in the swim into which I had blundered. Father was not mean or small in money matters—or did not mean to be; but he had carefully figured out, by the aid of all proper data and statistics, just what a young man at Harvard should legitimately spend, and just so much he allowed me, religiously adding the ten per cent that I was expected to contribute to church and missionary funds. I am afraid that too often my charity began at home and ended there; but even searing my conscience to the extent of that whole ten per cent, there was an awful shortage. And so it came about in time that I discovered there might be a certain accruing increment in poker and in friendly bets with fellows better fixed than I. I am telling you the worst, you see."

"And I dare say it all might have been worse," she rejoined, but with an air of courtesy somewhat strained. In truth, she wished he had not confessed the gambling and betting, putting it in such a frankly sordid light.

Digitized by Google

It seemed to coarsen and cheapen him, carrying him beyond the pale of that sympathy with which she had ben listening a moment before.

"But the end soon came," he went on hurriedly, the colour deepening in his face, as though he had read her thought. "I have never known how my father got on to the story, but from some source he had it in every detail; and he took the first train for Cambridge, dropping into my room altogether unannounced, to find me—smoking! That was the last straw. The sight of the cigar drove him to frenzy. And there was a curious inconsistency about my father's tempers; when he once lost control of himself—and it only happened at rare intervals—it seemed as though, in natural reaction from the repression of his everyday life, he fairly revelled in his rage. And then it seemed as though he lost all sense of values, storming the most, perhaps, over what might seem to anybody else the least of the offences. In this case the situation was not bettered by the fact that I all at once became possessed of a tell-truth-and-shame-the-devil mania. I was utterly sick of lies and pretence, and for the first time in my life I somehow mustered courage to be perfectly frank with my father. I told him the truth, and the whole truth, until my excitement had spent

Digitized by Google

itself, and I could pity his real suffering, comprehending the awful shock it was to him. And finally, as I melted, so did he, till at last I was prayed over and forgiven, really meaning it when I promised to toe the mark from that time on. But, as luck would have it, right on top of this came a prize fight in a neck of woods down near Providence, which a lot of us fellows had planned to take in. It had all been arranged in greatest secrecy, of course, to keep the authorities off the track; but Patsy McDonough, a wild Irish slugger who used to give us boxing lessons, as a special mark of favour, put some of us on to it, offering to take us in tow for the occasion. He said it would be the time of our lives—and it was! After father's visit, I had made up my mind not to go; but the plans had all been settled before, my chum was going, and the boys made such a kick at the idea of my backing out, without, as they considered, any good excuse—for of course I had a silly pride in keeping the real reason under cover—that finally I was persuaded to follow the crowd, simply because I hadn't moral courage to say No and stick to it. I thought, like Rip Van Winkle with his last drinks, that it wouldn't count that time. But it did, just the same, for before the second round was fought out, along came the sheriff, with half the hayseeds in the

Digitized by Google

country sworn in as deputies, and arrested every mother's son of us."

"How perfectly preposterous! Are spectators at a prize fight always arrested?"

"Fortunately not, and particularly not in these days, when public sentiment has broadened. And then, they had no business to hold us except as witnesses; but moral feeling was strong in that particular spot, and perhaps the town coffers were empty; at all events, we all went to jail in a bunch for breaking the peace."

"And what did you do?"

"Wired for my father to come. There was nothing else I could do."

"And he came?"

"He came; and when I saw him I knew that I had almost given him his death blow. You can imagine, perhaps, what a shock it was to him, what a blow to his pride, to find a son of his in jail, herded in with a lot of bruisers and sluggers—the very scum of earth, with the story of his shame blazoned abroad through all the papers in the land. And the worst of it all was that the shame had been of deliberate choice, as it seemed to him, and right on top of all the promises to lead a different life. That cut deepest of all, the feeling that I had stooped to play the part of a hypocrite, to pretend a repentance I did not feel, merely to fool him into forgive-

Digitized by Google

ness and the paying of my debts. With his own unswerving righteousness, he could not imagine an excuse, nor could he forgive. I was punished almost enough during that trial, while he sat as though turned to stone, never looking my way if he could help it, as if he had come to fairly loathe the sight of me. And afterward—well, you would not care to hear about that interview, Miss Ellery; but at the end of it he told me to go, and never let him see my face again."

"But he did not mean it—surely he did not. He was in a temper."

"Yes; he was in a temper; but, all the same—he said it," the lips closing together doggedly.

"But did he not take it back when he grew calmer? Surely he must have."

"I did not wait to see. I sold my watch to raise money, and started West that night."

"But your mother!"

"My mother died the year before I went to college. If she had lived"—there was a little break in his voice before he added, with a feeling that unsuccessfully sought to hide itself behind a touch of smiling mockery—"well, I don't suppose that I could have posed as an altogether white sheep under any circumstances but my wool might have been more picturesquely spotted."

Digitized by Google

Edith looked away without speaking, a mist before her eyes.

"I have made you sad," he exclaimed, in swift compunction. "It was so selfish of me to trouble you with my woes; but it was so sweet of you to listen, and to care—even a little bit. It is so long since any one knew or cared."

"But it is so kind of you to tell me the story," she hastily rejoined, moving rather uneasily under his glance. "And what happened next? Did you become a horse breaker then?"

"I wasn't so fortunate as to become anything all at once. It seemed as though all the young men on earth had been inspired at that very time to take Greeley's immortal advice; the labour market was glutted with them, while the majority were far better equipped than I to cope with the situation. I didn't know enough to keep a set of books, and I had certain objections to dealing faro; the result was that for a while I wasn't in it to any great extent. Having at the same time a robust appetite, it became embarrassing. I tried a little of everything, even down to taking a job as cook in a railroad camp, where the wretched navvies came near lynching me for the cruel messes I served them."

"You cooked!" the cry in a sharp staccato. She seemed, indeed, more perturbed for this rev-

Digitized by Google

elation than for all that had come before. "How could you?"

"Excuse me, Miss Ellery, I did not say that I did," he rejoined. "I *tried* to cook on one unhappy occasion, driven to it by force of circumstance. If I remember aright, I had not had a square meal for a week when I was reduced to that wild expedient. I told you, you know, that the swine had not always behaved according to the biblical precedent."

"O—h!" she exclaimed, with a gasping, indrawn breath; "how could you live through it?"

"I could not die," he grimly explained. "But I finally drifted onto a cattle ranch at the time of a round-up, when it developed that I had rather a talent for handling horses, thanks to an old Irishman we had at home, who knew more about a horse than anybody I have ever run across since. He taught me to ride when I was a kid, and thus what had seemed the least of my accomplishments became the most useful. Wherefore, in course of time was evolved Paul Brown, bronco breaker—at your service."

"And so ends the story?"

"Even so—the story of a wasted life."

"Why should you say that?" she protested, perhaps with more of kindness than she knew in

Digitized by Google

the depths of her brown eyes. "Surely it has not all been wasted."

"I don't know what part can be excepted. As a preparation for bronco breaking, the college years went for nothing; while, looking at it from the standpoint of the old days, the last ten years have been utterly profitless."

"But I am sure that even as a horse breaker you must do your work better, must feel more self-respecting, because of the education and because you are a gentleman," she urged. "And surely you should not regard yourself as any less a gentleman because you happen now to find yourself a horse breaker."

"Oh, don't be too kind," he unsteadily murmured, turning his face away. "I warn you it is dangerous. I shall be forgetting the terms of our compact and saying things that you will regard as—complimentary."

"I can't stay to listen if you should," rising hurriedly. "I must go. They will be wondering what has become of me."

"Won't you let me thank you first?" rising too, and coming close beside her. "It was so good of you to stay. I don't think you can quite realize what it is to me, after all these years, to be talking to such a girl as you on the footing of a friend. And what you have just said—ah, it is beyond thanks. It has almost re-

Digitized by Google

stored my faith in myself; it has made me feel that the game may be worth the candle, after all."

"Why should you ever doubt it?" Her colour was rising, but her eyes were full of kindness still. "Your luck has turned; nobody knows what fate may have in store for you yet. For my part, I have no doubt but you will be one of Wyoming's cattle kings in the sweet by and bye." She laughed rather constrainedly under the steady fire of his glance. "All things come to him who waits, you know."

"May I believe that, really?" an odd light in his eyes, as he came a step nearer.

"Oh, within reasonable limitations, I should say it would be perfectly safe. But now I must positively turn my face homeward."

"And may I walk back with you?"

"Oh, as to that——" faltering confusedly.

"You prefer that I should not. Ah, Miss Ellery, the horse breaker is rather more *en évidence* than the gentleman, after all."

"How can you say such a thing? You know that I did not mean to hint——"

"No, you did not; but I understand just the same. And don't let it trouble you: I am not complaining. Indeed, how could I ever complain of anything so long as I remember this hour? It is all right, Miss Ellery; only—won't

Digitized by Google

you shake hands with me—as a friend—before you go? You might do as much as that for any chance acquaintance you happened to meet in the street, you know."

Edith hesitated, her cheeks taking on a deeper pink as she bit the warm red morsel of an under lip. "Why, certainly, if you wish," she said, striving to assume a matter-of-fact air, as she held out a small, bare hand. "Good afternoon, Mr. Brown, and thanks for your confidence, which you must know I have found very interesting."

He made no response in words as he seized the little hand in a close, clinging pressure; but as he looked down at her, his eyes spoke in a sudden, tumultuous message such as no woman's heart has ever failed to understand, a mad, voiceless appeal, filling the girl with confused terror. Snatching the hand from his grasp, with a little inarticulate exclamation, she almost ran from him down the steep trail into the shadow of the trees. She had a vague idea that she ought to be very angry—with a sense of wonder that she was not. She knew that she was not; she was only frightened—stunned. A wild impulse of flight was upon her. She breathlessly told herself that she could never meet his glance again; she would like to escape forever from the audacious message of those

Digitized by Google

eyes; and, with no thought of analyzing motives or explaining her inconsistency, in that moment Marshall Woodbury's suit was won. In a flash her mind seemed clearly settled; she would meet her lover in Denver, and all should be as he wished.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER IX

THERE was to be a dance at the I X Bar ranch, and Mrs. Dennison, wife of the resident manager, out of the kindness of her heart had sent an invitation, most cordially urging the Ellery family to be present at the function.

"And I suppose she has not the remotest idea why we should not be there," remarked Nelsine, with an air of despairing recognition of such hopeless simplicity. "Indeed, I dare say that she would even have fancied us feeling slighted had she overlooked us."

"But why should we not go?" cried Edith, eagerly. "A genuine cowboy dance! It ought to be no end of fun."

"It is," Hugh declared, with a laugh of reminiscent enjoyment. "A circus is not to be mentioned in the same day. We took one in over at the Campbells' a while ago, and I only wish you could have been there. It was rich. As to the Dennisons," glancing rather wistfully at Nelsine—Hugh did so enjoy a good time—"it would be a pity to hurt their feelings."

"I know," she agreed, plaintively sighing;

Digitized by Google

"and they are so accommodating in the matter of eggs and chickens—it would be very inconvenient to have them put out with us. At the same time, when it comes to taking Edith to the dance——"

"But why not?" cried that young woman, in eager protest. "I am simply dying for a waltz; and this—isn't it respectable?"

"Oh, pre-eminently respectable, but as hopelessly mixed as heaven itself," laughed Hugh. "The best society will be there—also the second-best; all pretty much alike as to gowns and grammar; all particularly free and aggressively equal."

"It is not a private party, you must know," put in Nelsine, speaking with a certain air of condescension, as though feeling the topic considerably beneath her legitimate range of interest. "The cowboys get it up among themselves, to celebrate the end of the round-up. The Dennisons hardly do more than lend their house for the occasion, though, of course, poor Mrs. Dennison will simply work herself to death over the supper."

"Which will be enough to stir the shade of Epicurus to a watering at the mouth," went on Hugh appreciatively. "As to the dance *per se*, there was never anything like it anywhere else on earth. The boys hire a fiddler—and such a

Digitized by Google

fiddler!—who packs his wife and a parlour organ along with his own especial instrument of torture from a ranch some twenty miles up the country. He acts as master of ceremonies—from his own point of view, about the only plum in the pudding. The dances are sold by numbers, fifty cents apiece having become the established figure for the little pasteboards that tell each man when his turn comes. You pays your money, but you don't take your choice to any great extent; for the fiddler decides what each dance shall be, and calls out the numbers with strict impartiality, so that one has only to find a partner and—in the *recherché* language of the plains—hoof it to the extent of his money's worth, whether fate happens to have given him a reel or a redowa. This simple arrangement is of especial advantage in preventing any obstreperous cow-puncher from corralling more than his fair share of floor space and partners—a contingency that has been known to lead to embarrassing results in this simple and untrammelled society, where six-shooters are always handy. For that matter, though, it is not considered good form for a gentleman to wear his gun at a ball in these days; weapons and cartridge belts are always left with the saddles in the corral."

"Oh, this is the West I have dreamed of!"

Digitized by Google

cried Edith enthusiastically. "Surely, Nelsine, there could be no harm in our going just to look on."

"I suppose Mrs. Dennison might be pleased if we did," the politic little matron thoughtfully observed.

On the evening of the function, however, it was settled that only Hugh and his sister should go, Nelsine, even if she had wanted to make one of the party, not liking to ask Artalissa, who also had been invited, to remain at home with the children. "But you will not need any chaperon in this unsophisticated society," she said to Edith, who was vastly pleased with the frolic of going. "And of course you won't think of dancing."

Late hours for arrival were not fashionable in Cow Creek society; and it was in the cool gray twilight that they drove down the winding road, to find that, early as they were, many had come before them. Edith recognised most of the men belonging to the K 6 outfit mingled in the groups that were lounging about the barns and corrals, while Artalissa, fresh as a rose, in a pink cotton gown, was laughing with a couple of women in the doorway of the low, unpainted frame house.

Mr. Dennison, a lusty, handsome fellow in the early thirties, hurried to greet them with all

Digitized by Google

cordial hail-fellow-well-met-ship, leading the way to the house, where he left them to find his wife, who was, as he ingenuously explained to Edith's amusement, " in the lean-to, putting the last licks to the supper." A faint but unmistakable odour of boiled ham told the curious of at least one item to figure at the feast, while the vigorous churning of an ice-cream freezer loudly announced another.

They had come into what was evidently the family living room, a large, low apartment, unpainted and unplastered, its walls smoothly covered with cotton sheeting which had once been white, its smoky and dust-stained surface now brilliantly illumined with several kerosene lamps, while a generous row of candles were glued by their own drippings to a small pine shelf. The room had been stripped of most of its furniture, only a few chairs remaining stiffly ranged against the wall, while an arrangement of calico curtains in one corner hid from view a bed, which Edith presently discovered was a thoughtful provision for the babies, who appeared at the ball in numbers amazing to unaccustomed eyes. Fully one half of the women came laden with these blessings, while each fat youngster seemed to accept his lot in the common dumping-ground in most surprisingly good part. The plump mothers were the wives of neighbouring

Digitized by Google

ranchmen, young ladies, as a rule, seeming conspicuous by their absence. All were evidently arrayed in their best clothes, for the most part of heavy silk and wool stuffs, in which the wearers appeared distinctly uncomfortable on that warm summer night. Aside from Artalissa, who was unquestionably the belle of the evening, there was little beauty there; but, looking at the simple, untroubled faces, one seemed to understand why the babies in the corner were so boundlessly equipped with lazy good humour. It seemed to Edith that the whole company had caught somewhat of the ruminant content of their own kine.

The musicians were established in a corner near the open doors leading into two smaller apartments, fully lighted and stripped of furniture, into each of which the fiddler, by turning his head ever so little, might command a complete view. He was not an imposing personage, this gentleman, being afflicted with an extreme case of strabismus, while withal he was left-handed, holding his fiddle reversed, the end resting on the floor. It was for his convenience in this particular, presumably, that he preferred to squat in lowly, tailorlike fashion, where it would seem that there might be danger of his coming to grief from heedless heels upon occasion. Notwithstanding the unassuming pose, how-

Digitized by Google

ever, it was clear that he was sustained by a very large sense of his present importance, as with doleful squeaks he tuned the fiddle, while his wife, complacently seated at the parlour organ, responded to repeated demands to give him "A."

Mrs. Dennison, a rosy little woman, in a stiffly starched white gown grown to be something of a misfit from the shrinkage of many washings, came in to welcome them presently, volubly regretting that Mrs. Ellery had not come.

"She was so very sorry," Edith declared, with polite mendacity, "but it was the children, you know; she did not feel that she could leave them."

"But she might have brought them along; why not?" exclaimed the little lady in all sincerity, glancing toward the improvised nursery in the corner.

"I am so glad that my sister is to have a glimpse of society on the range," put in Hugh, irrelevantly.

"Yes, I'm glad she's come," returned the hostess simply. "We're so short of ladies. Every one counts."

"But you can't count on Miss Ellery, I'm afraid," amusedly glancing at Edith's face, which betrayed distinct dismay. "Mrs. Ellery

Digitized by Google

insisted that we should come home early; and if we should once begin dancing, it would be all the harder to tear ourselves away, you know."

"Not going to dance!" cried Mrs. Dennison, with such a very blank expression that Edith began to feel that their coming might have been a mistake, after all. "Why, you'll dance while you're here—sure. And we're so short of ladies, too; Miss Ellery won't get any chance to poke in the corner, even if you don't get to dance yourself, Mr. Ellery: but, of course, we want you both."

"I hope you want me enough to dance with me if one of my numbers happens to be called," Hugh gallantly returned. "I have taken a couple on the odd chance that I might have a turn before we have to go; and, perhaps, if I tip the fiddler a wink—who knows? As for my sister, though—oh, she doesn't know much about dancing. Her education has been sadly neglected in some particulars." Nobody disliked a lie more than did honest Hugh Ellery, but he held that there was such a thing as justifiable prevarication.

"Why, I should think you'd want to learn," innocently exclaimed the little woman, surveying the girl in wonder.

"I have thought of it," returned Edith, uncomfortably, darting a glance of reproach at her

Digitized by Google

brother. Happily at that moment the numbers for the first dance were called forth in stentorian voice by the fiddler, and a partner appeared to lead Mrs. Dennison away. "Oh, what a villain you are!" laughingly murmured the girl behind her fan. "You are like the poor old dog of the conundrum, that could lie first on one side and then on the other."

"I deny the allegation," he stoutly declared. "And where would you be now but for me, you ungrateful young woman?—stubbing your little toes over this uneven floor at the risk of your life," settling himself back for comfortable inspection of the company, now ranged in three sets, one in each room, all ready for the lancers. "Have you noticed the false teeth?" he asked presently.

Edith stared, doubting if she had heard aright, breaking then into a ripple of laughter. "The false teeth—mercy, no!" she exclaimed. "What an idea!"

"Well, just count them, if you can," he persisted. "That is a curious characteristic of people who have lived long on the plains—I have noticed it time and again. The women, as a rule, seem to have no teeth after they are thirty—barring such as from their general appearance would seem to have come from some dental misfit parlours. The men don't seem quite so

Digitized by Google

unfortunate, but toothache is their commonest malady. Whether it all comes from lack of proper care, or merely from too much hot bread and bacon, I don't know; but the fellow who is writing papers to prove that we are developing into a toothless and hairless race must have begun his observations in Wyoming."

"But you can't accuse them of wearing wigs," laughed Edith, regarding the various knots of hair that flitted by in the dance, each one tightly skewered in place, as it seemed, by sundry fanciful gilt pins. "They rather remind one of those cushions one sees in the stores on bargain days, all aglitter with rhinestones and things, and marked 'Two for twenty-five cents.'"

"Ah, who is oozing malice and all uncharitableness now?" returned Hugh, lazily amused.

"Never mind. I would rather know who is the symphony in yellow over yonder—the woman in the old-gold gown, with a complexion to match."

"The *lady*, if you please; she would be cut to the bone if she heard herself called a woman. That is Mrs. Manning, one of our aristocrats. If I introduce you to her she will tell you that she is so 'het up,' and make remarks about 'them girls.' She is a victim of dyspepsia, moreover, which she seems to regard as a special provision for conversational emergencies.

Digitized by Google

The young woman opposite is chiefly famed for having brought six children into the world in five years, each venture having resulted in twins. They say that the poor woman clothes the whole outfit in discarded flour sacks, when they are playing around home in the summer; and as once in a while the lettering is slow to wash out, it is related that occasionally the kids may be seen running about conspicuously labelled, ' Pride of the Rockies,' ' Denver's Best,' and the like. The man dancing with her runs some six thousand head of cattle—and probably doesn't own a boiled shirt."

So Hugh ran on in good-humoured gossip, until, with much shrill giggling and breathless exclamation, the dancers subsided for the moment, when, with no waste of time, the perspiring fiddler shouted the numbers for the next dance. It happened that Hugh was one to be favoured of fate, and he went to find Mrs. Dennison, leaving his sister alone.

Edith looked on dreamily amused, the whole affair seeming as unreal as a scene in a play. It required some self-restraint to refrain from smiling at the frank coquetries of the ruddy-cheeked girls, at the sometimes reckless gyrations on the part of the jolly, sunburned, flannel-shirted fellows, most of whom moved as though embarrassed by imaginary spurs upon

Digitized by Google

their heels, while some few had become almost bowlegged from years of hard riding. Now and then a cry would issue from the calico-curtained *créche* in the corner, whereat would occur a wild rush of mothers to the spot, their partners unceremoniously deserted, to the great confusion of the quadrilles; but these episodes seemed to be accepted quite as a matter of course by everybody present, hardly calling for even a smile by way of comment. More than anything else, Edith found herself diverted by the quaint humour of the master of ceremonies, who, while scraping out a highly original rendering of Sweet Violets and Old Dan Tucker, was fully alive to his opportunity to otherwise contribute to the jollity of the occasion. "All chaw hay!" he would blithely cry, when a *chassez* was in order; while his version of "All hands round!" was to bid all to "Keep ahookin' an' ahookin' an' ahookin'!" the variation evidently suggested by the local fashion of locking elbows as the dancers passed each other by, a method possessing distinct advantages in a gloveless company.

But though wholly unconventional, there was nothing to be condemned in the manners of this simple company. They took their pleasure more joyously than Edith had been accustomed to see in her own weary and well-bred world; the laughter was more frequent, more hearty; the

Digitized by Google

fun ever waxing more fast and furious as the hours ran on; but the roughest cowboy among them, even if, in the exuberance of his feelings, he might indulge in an occasional pigeon wing uncalled for by the prompter, yet accorded his buxom partner a courtesy beyond reproach; while no lady in all the land could have frolicked more discreetly than did those unpretentious maids and matrons in their ill-fitting, homemade frocks. They were all there to have a good time, and they had it, with the joyous simplicity of perennial youth.

Hugh made a few good-natured attempts to introduce his sister to the women present, but as fiddle and parlour organ were untiringly devoted to keeping the company in constant motion, and as the men outnumbered their available partners as three to one, there was little chance for sociability outside the dances. The majority of the men were disposed in little groups outside, exchanging jokes and laughing together as they waited for their numbers to be called. All of the women, with the exception of Edith, were pressed into service for every dance, and she began to grow uncomfortable, comprehending the meaning of the anxious glances cast upon her. If these people but dared, she felt sure they would come in a body, begging her to join them, if only for charity. As it was,

Digitized by Google

a couple of brawny fellows, with handkerchiefs tied about their arms in token of their rôles, were gaily filling a deficiency that became even more painfully apparent when Artalissa, a festoon of gathers slipping from her belt, had rushed away to the milk house outside, converted into a dressing room for the occasion, closely followed by another woman bearing the babe whose demands had become peremptory.

At this point Mr. Dennison sidled up to where Edith was sitting to ask, with a deprecatory smile, if she wouldn't try it—just once. Even if she didn't know much about dancing, he kindly urged, in all good faith, nobody was going to notice or criticize, while he was certain that she would catch onto the steps all right, once she was on the floor. To Edith, naturally loath to hurt the feelings of these good folks, the situation was fraught with keen embarrassment. Clothing refusal as tactfully as she might, it left her feeling ill at ease, and she looked about for Hugh, to propose their going home; but, with true brotherly method, he had become oblivious of her existence in the interest of talking cattle with a coterie outside. As her glance ranged the group of faces to be seen through the open window, she noticed Paul Brown, standing somewhat in the shadows at one side, and while she hesitated,

Digitized by Google

considering whether or not she should summon him to bear a message to her brother, the thought crossed her mind that if she should yield to the importunities of these people and dance, it might not be unpleasant to have a waltz with him. With his lithe grace and stalwart length of limb, it was certain that he would dance well. And yet she knew that he would hardly presume to ask her to so favour him, even in that democratic company. And this recalled other things that had been in her mind since their Sunday talk. It was shameful that such a man should consent to this ostracism, he who had it in his power to be whatever he would. And on the impulse of the moment, flashing a glance at him which she felt he must understand, she slipped away through the kitchen, redolent with its waiting supper, and on through an open door leading out into the night.

This side of the house she found to be wholly deserted, and blessing that fact, she stood still, striving to recover her equanimity. She was terrified with the thought that she had tacitly asked this man to meet her here, although prepared to make excuse to him, no less than to her own perturbed conscience, that she wanted him to convey her message to Hugh; but while she framed the pretext in her mind, she knew that she had but grasped the

Digitized by Google

chance to see him once more alone. Ever since that day up the creek, indeed, she had been watching, though hardly admitting the fact, for the opportunity that now, as it seemed, had come. She had persuaded herself that his confidence imposed upon her the duty of counselling and advising. She would have him reconciled to his father at whatever cost to his pride. He should renounce this rough life, to take that place among men to which by birth and breeding he was so justly entitled. She did not own to herself what subtle delight was in the sense of power, in the feeling that to her it had been given to shape this man's life for good.

But while she waited, Paul Brown was loitering on the other side of the house, uncertain what he might do. Far from being a conceited man, he was quite too much in awe of Miss Ellery to dream of actual invitation in her glance. As he saw her go out through the kitchen, to be sure, the daring fancy crossed his mind that he might, perhaps, by seeming accident, meet her presently; not too soon, however, lest she perceive the design and be vexed at his presumption. And so he sauntered along undecidedly, with one eye on the milk house dressing room, where he supposed she had gone, hoping that presently he might see her, and anything but pleased when he encountered Artalissa instead.

Digitized by Google

"Have you come out for a breath of fresh air too?" she called gaily, delighted with the idea that he might be in search of her. "My! but ain't it hot in there? I'm pretty nearly roasted. If it was only leap year, I believe I should invite you to go and take a walk to get cooled off"—this last emphasized with a coquettish simper.

"But since it isn't leap year, perhaps I would better invite you," he returned, with what grace he might, seeing no other way out of it. He could illy afford to offend Artalissa, who had it in her power to mete out swift retribution through his appetite. Moreover, he had a flattered consciousness that he had been advancing rapidly in the girl's capricious favour, and the idea filled him with a certain indulgent good humour, while he counted upon tact to extricate him from the dilemma shortly.

And, congratulating himself upon his *finesse* in the matter, he was hurrying around the house a few minutes later, when he met Miss Ellery, but she passed him by with such unseeing hauteur as froze the words of greeting upon his lips. She made her way straight to where her brother was standing.

"Hugh," she exclaimed, in a clear, high voice, that to Paul Brown's listening ears seemed somehow to suggest the sound of tinkling ice in

Digitized by Google

a glass of water, " I am tired, and, if you don't mind, I think we would better be going."

" All right," Hugh good-naturedly returned. " I'll have the buckboard around in a moment."

" Let me go for the team, Mr. Ellery," put in Brown eagerly. But his effort failed in its main purpose, for although allowed to assist in their departure, even permitted to hold back the silken folds of Miss Ellery's gown from contact with the wheels, as her brother lifted her to her seat, the young lady did not bestow upon him so much as a parting glance.

Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER X

THERE is a certain order of women seeming as naturally exempt from toil of earth as are the lilies of the field. Nelsine Ellery was not strong, as she always explained, with gentle resignation, when domestic difficulties were under discussion. There was nothing that she more regretted; and, anxious to build herself up, she was given to taking long horseback rides, pursuing her way over the roughest trails for hours, with an endurance that never flagged; or, with the same laudable end in view, she would play at tennis until her lusty husband failed beside her; but withal, the strength so garnered was never sufficient to cope with the drudgery of the household. She perfectly comprehended how much labour her *menage* involved. She felt that two good servants were really required to do it properly; but when, after all reasonable effort on her part, but one could be obtained, she was wholly unable to see why the burden, for which she was wholly irresponsible, should be saddled upon her. She was quite willing to make concessions. She would take care of her own room, barring the

Digitized by Google

sweeping of it; and each morning she would dust the parlour; more than that, on the days devoted to laundry work she would plan simple dinners, even upon occasion having the dessert placed upon a side table, and changing the plates with her own hands; while in the event of company she was more than willing to wholly set the table and arrange the flowers. Beyond this, however, Artalissa must manage somehow—that was what she was for; while if, upon occasion, the girl perversely fell short in the performance of her duties, then must Hugh spare one of the men to assist her; Nelsine simply could not muss about in the kitchen—she had not the strength for it. And Hugh, who found well-nigh as much difficulty in keeping the proper equipment of men as of maids about the place, was often put to dire straits, many a time performing tasks about the barns himself, in lieu of the man he must detail to assist with the housework.

Nelsine, in fact, seemed always to regard herself as a favoured guest in her own household, to be petted and shielded by everybody; and Edith, who had a New England girl's trained faculty for doing many things well, found tasks in plenty provided for her willing hands by this charmingly helpless sister-in-law. In particular, Edith had a talent for dress amounting almost to genius. No gown ever came from her dress-

Digitized by Google

maker's hands, no bit of millinery was ever added to her store, but a magic touch here or there, with a few stitches from her inspired needle, had wrought a certain change vaguely recognised by her friends as style, really but the expression of her own individuality. Detesting plain sewing, however, with a fervour equal to Nelsine's own, she had found the possession of this talent a fruitful source of trouble during her stay at K 6. It was now a hat, "Which you can fix with a touch, you dear, clever thing!" Nelsine would say with caressing enthusiasm; or, again, it would be a gown beyond wearing in its present obsolete fashion. "If you would only show me how to change it," the owner of the garment would urge in wheedling apology, the fiction of instruction swiftly forgotten, as Nelsine comfortably rocked and chatted in her dainty, cushioned chair, while Edith ripped and pinned and stitched, until the other would be moved to voluble regret for all the trouble she was making. Nelsine was one who, if she might murder while she smiled, would yet always smile with such surpassing sweetness that the victim might be beguiled into forgetting that he was being done to death.

Edith, however she might writhe in spirit sometimes for tasks especially trying, could yet generally find smiles for Nelsine's coaxing soph-

Digitized by Google

istries, finding always a certain pleasure in yielding to the caprices of the pretty tyrant, who but asked what she liked with the unconscious selfishness of a spoiled child. But when, on the morning after the Dennison's dance, the little woman tripped into the room with an armful of summer gowns demanding repairs and alteration, Edith found herself on the verge of rebellion. There are times when even our best beloved seem inspired by the devil for our discomfiture.

"We shall be needing all our thin gowns soon," Nelsine inconsequentially began, depositing her burden upon the bed. "When our summer does come, it comes with a rush; and such burning, tropical heat! Positively, the wind is like a breath from the lower regions."

"Yes," Edith listlessly rejoined, her eyes fixed upon some far-away point outside the window, pointedly avoiding the heap of crisply starched lawns and linens.

"It is too bad to trouble you, you sweet thing," went on the siren voice more hesitantly, evidently put to confusion by the indifferent reception. "But what can I ever do with a thing like this?" and Nelsine held up one garment with an aggrieved air. "The yoke is too narrow, you see. It always *was* too narrow." (Nelsine had a mortal horror of seeming to grow stout.) "And, of course, it has shrunk with

Digitized by Google

washing until now it is like a strait-jacket. There is embroidery enough for a new yoke, and I meant to have the children's governess fix it last winter; but she kept putting it off, until finally she left—and the gown was left too. Really," interjecting a sigh of reluctant conviction, as though both hurt and amazed at the thought, "I don't believe she ever wanted to fix it."

"If you had had the starch washed out of it first she might have found the task more tempting," Edith suggested, with dry indifference, her glance instantly reverting to the landscape.

"I suppose that would have been a good idea, now you speak of it," agreed the other, with an air of concession, turning the waist about in her hands. "But now there is so little time, while Artalissa has so much to do I hate to ask her. And I thought I should like to have it to wear on the Fourth. I have really decided to give the dinner."

"And invite all the neighbours?" the tone languidly dissuasive. It was a plan that Nelsine had been discussing for days.

"Oh, not all of them, please Heaven!—only those who have invited us. Of course, it is a dreadful nuisance, but I have *got* to come to it, and I feel that I should be flying in the face of

Digitized by Google

Providence not to seize upon the opportunity while you are here to help me out with it."

"Thanks so much! to be offered up as a sort of vicarious——"

"And then there is the chance that some of them may have arranged to go to the picnic at Cottonwood, and so refuse the invitation," went on Nelsine cheerfully, her eyes fixed upon vacancy. "The chances are ten to one, I should say, that if I ask them for that day they won't all come."

"For these and all other mercies, may the Lord make us duly thankful!"

"And Artalissa is willing—that's another argument in its favour. To tell you the truth, I had an easier time with her than I had expected. Artalissa is not given to encouraging dinner parties, as a rule; but I suspect she was really glad of an excuse to refuse Jim's invitation to go to the Cottonwood picnic. I heard the boys joking him about it as I went by the bunk house this morning. It was such a piece of luck that it was not Brown who asked her."

"It is not too late for him to do so yet," Edith dryly remarked, turning about to more squarely face the window.

"I don't believe he will. He would rather sit about and flirt with her here," returned Nelsine comfortably. "And I have pinned her

Digitized by Google

down for the dinner now, anyway; she can't get out of it. 'First catch your hare,' as that cook-book woman so sensibly advised. Artalissa stands committed to five courses, and my mind is at rest. Then there will be the bonfire in the evening—have you noticed that Hugh is having every tree on the place trimmed? There is going to be a glorious pile of brush; and after dinner we can have chairs out on the lawn, and then, with the touch of a match, everybody is entertained, and no trouble at all. I suppose we ought really to have some fireworks too, but Hugh does so hate to spare a man to send to Cheyenne. A few rockets, though, would help so much; don't you think so?"

"Think what?—about the dress?" and Edith looked up with a bewildered air. "Pardon me, Nelsine; I am afraid I was not listening."

"I should imagine not; but it doesn't matter," the tone, however, distinctly aggrieved. "It would have been more to the purpose if I had been talking about the dress, since the first requisite is to have something to wear. If you would just show me how to go about it, dearie. It doesn't look much to do."

"Oh, no; it is a mere trifle," Edith agreed, with a sardonic smile for the look of discomfiture with which the owner of the waist was inspecting its lines at arm's length.

Digitized by Google

"But what would you do first?" the question eloquent of fretful helplessness.

"I think I should rip out the old yoke, if I were you," Edith placidly returned, her hands relentlessly folded upon her lap. "It would seem to be a case where it is inevitable that you should be off with the old love before you can be on with the new."

"Oh," rejoined Nelsine dejectedly, as though the idea was somehow fraught with unpleasant surprise. She limply reached for a pair of manicure scissors that lay on the dresser, snipping away for a few minutes in silence. "My eyes are so weak," she plaintively observed then; "and this fine machine sewing, all starched up as it is, is simply dreadful." There was no response from the idler, swaying in the low rocking-chair by the window. Nelsine rested from the work to look at her with an acute sense of injury. "If you would only start it for me, Edith."

"Oh, certainly; of course," cried the girl, with an abrupt, mirthless laugh. It seemed incredible that Nelsine could really take herself seriously. "I rather suspected that I might have the privilege of starting it. I have a certain gift of clairvoyance, you know."

"I am so sorry to trouble you about it," and Nelsine's manner stiffened as the work was almost rudely snatched from the pretty, helpless

Digitized by Google

hands. A sharp feeling of disappointment had been growing upon her. She had not realized before that Edith could be so inconsiderate as she appeared this morning; and that she could actually betray temper when asked to do such a trifling service as this, was a sorry revelation. "Of course, if you don't feel like doing it this morning——"

"I can't imagine when I am likely to feel more like doing it," the girl dryly interrupted, her eyes doggedly fixed upon the work. But then, in sudden shame for the ungraciousness, she looked up with a smile, which, if rather forced, was yet all tenderness. "Don't I always feel like doing anything for you, Nelsine? I'm sure, if I don't I ought to."

Good-natured Nelsine at once sprang to her feet to clasp the girl in impulsive embrace, pressing a kiss on one of the flushed cheeks. "You dear thing!—how sweet you always are!" she murmured, in her pretty, cooing way; but in the privacy of their room that night she was moved to remark to Hugh that she was "glad Edith was going to be married, for her temper—— Well, at twenty-three a girl could hardly be considered an old maid, of course; but, naturally, one having only herself to think of must develop a certain selfishness—a sort of egotism——"

Digitized by Google

"Have you and Edith been quarrelling?" demanded Hugh, in blunt surprise.

"Quarrelling!—what an idea! I never quarrel with anybody," protested Nelsine warmly. "I may have my faults, but nobody has ever accused me of having a bad temper. Of course I am tried sometimes, but I can always make allowances. Edith is one of the dearest girls in the world. We all have our little peculiarities, though; and, really, there is a certain acidity in her manner now and then that is—well, rather cauterizing. In fact, you know, dear, you are all a little freakish in your family; and I believe Edith is more so than any of you. It wouldn't surprise me if she died an old maid, after all."

"I thought you began by rejoicing that she was going to be married," returned the husband dryly, not altogether pleased with the sweeping charge against his tribe.

"Oh, I don't know what to think of her!" cried Nelsine in helpless petulance. "I don't believe she even knows what to think of herself," which remark, could she have heard it, Edith must have admitted was but an exact statement of fact.

The girl was, in fact, acutely miserable, her nerves all aquiver with anger and chagrin. With a curious zeal in contributing as much as might be to her own discomfort—a folly to

Digitized by Google

which the wisest may stoop upon occasion—the glance of invitation she had cast upon Paul Brown on the night of the dance had become distorted in imagination to an indiscretion that must have been evident to all the people there. She could fancy those simple souls, so starved for gossip, wagging their virtuous heads together over the episode, her name—hers!—riddled with the darts of slander, when but the other day it would have seemed so utterly impossible to even dream of herself as subject for criticism from any source. She hated Paul Brown with a fierce, vindictive anger, that interest in him should have led her to a step so compromising—he, Artalissa's lover! And therein lay the most poignant sting of all, that she might have seemed to pose even for a moment as a rival of that dark-faced girl who served in her brother's kitchen. Jealous she was not, in the ordinary sense of the term; the unconscious aristocratism of her nature lifted her beyond the possibility of that, while, moreover, all her interest in Brown himself, which she had held to be but philanthropic at most, seemed now to have been strangled in the knowledge of the girl's claim upon him: but there was humiliation beyond words in the thought with which she persisted in torturing herself—an idea only possible to nerves wholly unstrung—that the fellow

Digitized by Google

might be flattering himself with the idea that his conquest had reached from kitchen to parlour, perchance even smiling to think that he had only to choose between them.

In point of fact, however, Paul Brown had never been in more unsmiling mood. He could not but see, in the chill repellence of Miss Ellery's manner when they chanced now and then to meet, that he was hopelessly out of favour, but he only interpreted it to mean that she had repented the impulsive kindness of the other day, and would relentlessly relegate him to his proper place. In particular he fancied that her purpose might be to punish him for that audacious glance at parting, which quickened his pulse-beats even now in remembering.

Until then she had been all kindness, he reflected. There had been almost a compact of friendship between them; but in one mad moment he had forfeited all his advantage. It had been so wholly unpremeditated, however, so almost unconscious, indeed, that it seemed to him now as fairly unjust that it should count so heavily against him. He had not guessed the secret his eager eyes were betraying until he had caught her answering glance, frightened, protesting, yet with something of sweet helplessness in the depths of her brown eyes that had thrilled him with wild exultation, even

Digitized by Google

while all the chivalry of his nature was roused to repent the precipitancy. With all their startled forbidding there had been no anger in her eyes, he remembered; bitterly arguing that for very consistency's sake she should have been kinder now.

It seemed to him that he had but fittingly rounded out a career of wasted effort in this infatuation for a woman as far removed from him in actual fact as though she had belonged to another planet. If he had racked his brain to discover the most irrational thing left him to do, he grimly told himself, it could have been only this. And yet it had come about so wholly without volition on his part that it seemed he should rail at Fate rather than his own innate foolishness. She was the first woman of her class—of his own class, as he liked to remember—that he had met in intimate association since his home had been left behind. There was that in her pronunciation of certain words, little tricks of New England speech, in the dainty refinement of her manner, even in the perfume that subtly emanated from her garments, something that spoke to him of his past as nothing in all these years of his frontier life had done. He was always longing to be with her, to be speaking to her, simply to hear her answering voice. He delighted to see her eyes

Digitized by Google

deepen and darken as she talked; to watch for the smile that was really her greatest charm. If anybody had suggested in his hearing that she was but an ordinarily pretty girl, with a distinct sprinkling of freckles across her nose, he would have been indignantly amazed; to him, when her lips were curved with that exquisite smile, when she looked up at him with the glow of eager interest in her eyes, her beauty was simply divine.

And yet he had never dreamed of daring to love her, this queen among women, until that fateful Sunday, when something in the sweetness of her upturned, listening face, had of a sudden revealed his feeling to his own startled heart, while the secret had told itself. Mad he had been indeed; but withal, never so mad as to think that he might ask this dainty, high-bred girl, with her soft, jewelled hands, to become his wife, to bake his bread and wash his shirts in that rough cabin over by Lost River. He laughed in sardonic mirth as the idea crossed his mind. If it were fear of any such presumption as that which bade her hold him so at arm's length, he bitterly longed to reassure her. There was nothing he could ask of her—nothing—except that she be a little kind to him in these few days when chance had thrown them together. Had she but the heart

Digitized by Google

of a woman, she could hardly have denied him so much as this, he angrily argued within himself. It was the best of his life that he had given, asking nothing; and why should she so contemptuously regard the gift that assumed to be no more than a flower laid down at her feet, only asking a kindly glance before it might be trampled upon and forgotten?

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XI

PAUL BROWN, becoming daily more bitterly at odds with life, instinctively turned upon Jim Kittery for the venting of his spleen. He could even find genuine delight now and then, almost sufficient to divert him from his own suffering, through goading this other unfortunate to the verge of madness by paying ostentatious attention to the willing Artalissa. Jim, with the keen eyes of a lover, guessing from the first the bent of the girl's fickle fancy, had made a point of behaving with a sullen rudeness toward his rival, which Paul, too indifferent at first to notice, now found a vicious satisfaction in avenging. It was this, no less than a sort of desperate *ennui* leading him to seek any kind of diversion, that impelled him when the family dinner hour was past, the men's supper having been eaten at the same time, to establish himself in the kitchen doorway, listlessly smoking, while Artalissa, in her own phrase, was "doing" the great piles of greasy dishes emanating from the dual tables of the establishment.

It was a tribute to her charms for which the

Digitized by Google

girl paid a price, for it had been Jim's duty to assist her in this work, a task that he had taken upon himself so willingly that the other boys, always detesting "wimmin's work," had come to consider themselves definitely excused from any part in it. And now when, in a dudgeon, Jim had deserted his post, Artalissa found her labours almost doubled, while too proud, if not too discreet, to complain to Mrs. Ellery, knowing full well that without embarrassing explanation on her part, it could only be the recreant lover, his presence now so undesired, who would be relegated to assist her.

"If Jim Kittery was sitting around like you are, he'd take hold and do these dishes himself," she tentatively remarked one evening, the blunt hint rounded off with a coquettish laugh.

"Would he?" drawled Brown indifferently, settling himself more comfortably on the doorstep. "Then I must be warned by his example and not do anything of the sort; for you know you don't think much of Jim and his ways, Artalissa."

"How do you know that I don't?" she retorted, with a toss of her head, wholly pleased with his nonchalance. She would have made him wash the dishes if she might; but, womanlike, she would have admired him the less had he stooped to the work.

Digitized by Google

"Oh, I don't really know, of course; but I am pretty good at guessing," he returned, imperturbably blowing smoke rings over his head. "And don't you think you ought to be rather ashamed of yourself for snubbing him so cruelly?—now, honour bright, Artalissa!"

"I don't know what you are talking about," she declared, darting an oblique little glance at him, her strong white teeth gleaming in the smile that always seemed to light her dark face with a covert glow of evil. "Sometimes girls play off, and treat the worst the fellows they really like the best."

"Do they?" he carelessly returned, his mind already wandering to other topics. He always left the burden of conversation to her, rarely troubling himself to respond beyond the demands of bare civility; yet Artalissa, with true womanly perversity, found herself far more interested in this novel follower than she had ever been in any of those who, with mistaken assiduity, had paid her court. Her glance softened now as she looked at him, something in the unconscious arrogance of his strong masculinity irresistibly swaying her sensuous, animal nature. In the unreasoning polity of a woman's heart the king can do no wrong.

She would have been less indulgent of his mood could she have imagined that, as he sat

Digitized by Google

there gazing beyond her with dreamy eyes, he was but recalling a vision of Edith Ellery as he had seen her there one day, her round, white arms bared to the elbow, her cheeks flushed with the uphill task of initiating Mrs. Ellery into the mysteries of some sort of a cake. Never to his masculine eyes had she seemed so simply womanly and sweet. And as though she had divined the trend of his thoughts, Artalissa abruptly broke in upon his reverie:

"I'll have one less to wash dishes for next week, thank goodness!" she exultantly exclaimed. "That Ellery girl is going."

Brown leaned over, deliberately cleaning the ashes from his pipe. "And where is she going?" he asked at length, with a show of desultory interest.

"I don't know, and I don't know as I care," the girl returned, as she clatteringly disposed some of the dishes in a cupboard at the far end of the room. "But I know what she is going to do," she went on with a laugh, as she came back; "she is going to be married. I heard them joking her about it at dinner to-night."

She stopped short in disappointment that this bit of news, to her woman's soul of such vital importance, should seem to fall so flat. There was absolutely no response from the stooping figure in the doorway, heedlessly staring into

Digitized by Google

space. But that was just his way, she petulantly told herself; one might about as well talk to a stump.

"She's going to have a kitchen of her own to try her high-toned ways in," she continued after a moment, talking merely for the pleasure of expressing her thoughts aloud. "She used to be coming out here 'most every day, just henning around, offering to make the dessert or a salad or something, saying in that palavering way of hers that she'd been to cooking school, and letting on that she knew how to do it all better than anybody. But I just went to Mrs. Ellery, and says I, 'I ain't been to cooking school as much as I've been to district school,' says I, 'but if my cooking ain't good enough for this ranch, I can go where it is. I ain't above being helped with my work,' says I, 'and especially in a place where there's as much to do as there is here; but I ain't asking for cooking lessons from anybody.' I talked right up to her, just like that. She blushed, and was dreadfully cut up, saying that I was mistaken. Miss Edith—she's forever calling her Miss Edith to me, so as to hint that that's what I'd ought to be calling her too—as if I ever would! I feel myself as good as her any day, and I'd have her to know it. That's one reason I hate to have her around; she puts on too many—

Digitized by Google

why——" breaking off in sharp vexation as she turned to find herself alone, wrathfully striding to the door to see whither the truant had flown. "Well, if that ain't polite! That man just naturally makes me tired from head to foot with his ways; but then——" the extenuating afterthought cut short with a sigh, as she turned back to the dishes.

As he was hurrying aimlessly down toward the bridge Brown encountered Mr. Ellery climbing the path, a pair of small shoes and stockings in one hand, while with the other he led his shrinking firstborn, the urchin picking his steps with a whimpering care that told how little the small pink soles were inured to mother earth.

"What do you think of a youngster who prefers going barefoot to wearing good shoes and stockings?" he called out to Brown as they met, his eyes twinkling with appreciation of his practical joke along the line of discipline. He had too imperfectly outgrown his own boyhood to achieve entire success in the rôle of the stern parent. "A boy who sneaks off to paddle in the creek when his mother has forbidden him ever to do it," he went on, severely eying the child, who had seized the opportunity to perch himself uncertainly on one foot to refresh the other tortured member. "A boy who has no

Digitized by Google

thought for snakes in the grass, all ready and waiting to bite him—to say nothing of the danger of getting webfooted in the water."

"I'm not webfooted yet," protested the small sinner, wriggling his toes in anxious experiment.

"All the same, you are taking chances, young man; ask Mr. Brown if you're not." Then, catching sight of Brown's face, he added, "But you may run away to your mother now and tell her what you've been doing," laughing as he watched the unhappy youngster picking his steps over the bristling stems of newly mown grass. "If we only could cure that fellow of wanting to go barefoot—but then, he comes by the craze naturally enough. I had it myself when I was young. It keeps his mother on thorns, though; she is in such deadly terror of rattlers. But what is it, Brown—anything in particular?"

"I believe I've stayed about as long as I can, Mr. Ellery. I ought to be getting back to my own place," the young man said, with brusque decisiveness. "I had a letter from my partner yesterday, and he tells me that the fences have been cut again, and things are at the devil generally. I ought to be there."

"These fence-cutters ought to be strung up without quarter, for all the trouble they make," returned Ellery vexedly, his face clouded over.

Digitized by Google

"I was hoping that you would be here for a couple of weeks longer, at the very least."

"I know; and if I could spare the time——" the hesitating tone yet wholly uncompromising. "But it is hardly necessary, Mr. Ellery. All the bunch we planned to handle are pretty well broken in now, and Jim Kittery can go on with them well enough. He's a consummate ass about some things; if he were seven feet high, there could be mighty little question about his being the biggest fool on earth; but all the same, he can sit a horse, and if it were not for his temper—and general chumpiness—he'd make a first-class bronco buster."

Ellery laughed amusedly. "He ought to thank you for such a recommendation. If he were running for the Legislature on the wrong ticket, you could hardly give him a worse send-off. But there's one job I hardly like to trust to Kittery, Brown. It's that bay filly you were riding to-day—the Lothair colt, you know." He paused, but, as the young man remained silent, continued with offhand persuasiveness: "How long have you been here, anyway—three weeks Wednesday, wasn't it? Well, this is Friday, you know; and don't you think you'd better stay till next Wednesday and make it even weeks? The fact is, I'd like you to give the time especially to that filly. I believe she is going to

Digitized by Google

make a beauty, while you can't point out another on the place with equal promise for speed. Even Kittery, with all his fool ways, had the sense to say, when you were riding across the field this afternoon, that she ought to be worth five hundred dollars at the very least."

"Yes; the colt is a beauty," Brown absently agreed.

"My sister admires her very much, too, as it happens; and it has occurred to me that I should particularly like to give her to Miss Ellery by and by, for a—er—for a present."

A wedding present!—he might as well have said the word. Brown's alert imagination had instantly filled in the slight pause. "Yes," he assented, his forefinger straying to the collar of his shirt, that seemed of a sudden too tight for him. "Yes; there is not a better colt on the place."

"There does not seem to be a bit of viciousness in her, either; and since you have now such a short time," nonchalantly assuming that his point had been conceded, "you would better begin training her to the sidesaddle at once. I should like, if possible, to have my sister try her before you go. And especially, I wish you would get her hardened to noises of every sort, so far as you can manage it. Heaven only knows how one of these western

Digitized by Google

horses can ever be educated up to the rackets of an eastern city."

"I'll do the best I can," returned Brown apathetically.

"And you'll stop until Wednesday?"

"Oh, I'll stay until the filly is fit to offer Miss Ellery," the young man said, with a grim smile. A wedding present—and he was bidden to make it ready for her. The irony of it!

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XII

To please the children and somewhat celebrate the day, Hugh had planned a mighty bonfire for the night of the Fourth of July; while Nelsine, frugally minded to get the utmost possible out of the function, had carried out her purpose of asking her neighbours to dine at an hour which, to the majority, would have seemed more befitting thoughts of bed. But with characteristic unconsciousness of any possibility of adverse criticism on the part of those she elected to honour, Nelsine had planned her hospitality with canny regard for the falling of darkness, that the bonfire might promptly follow the coffee, having all due regard for this powerful ally in a company whose coin of sociability was but too generally the doubtful gold of a clamlike silence.

And now they were all gathered on the steep hillside near the barns. The deep-worn *coulée* at the east was filled almost to its brim with brush and *débris*, from which a mighty tower of flame was rising against the blackness of the night. But although the dinner had been irreproachable throughout its several courses, with nothing to

Digitized by Google

mar its perfect success beyond a certain despairing uncertainty observable on the part of the guests now and then in respect to the multiplicity of forks and spoons allotted them; and although the bonfire was all and more than its architect had planned, both host and hostess found themselves oppressed with a growing consciousness that the occasion was somewhat of a failure after all.

For, in the first place, anxious to discharge all her social obligations at one fell swoop, Nelsine had overlooked a long-standing coolness between the Loverings, of the Lovering-Baker ranch, and the Campbell family, all owing to certain remarks which Mrs. Lovering was reported to have made relative to the reading of postal cards in the Little Cow Creek post office, a controversy carried so far that the Lovering-Baker ranch regularly received its mail by special messenger from Cheyenne; and the bringing of these disgruntled ladies together could not but cast something of shadow over the function. Mr. Lovering had not come, as his wife placidly explained, " because he did so hate to fix up "; but she was supported on the one hand by a son, a lusty, sunburned fellow, tongue-tied with shyness, while at her other side sat a daughter, whose round, freckled face might suggest to the alert imagination nothing more likely than an

Digitized by Google

underdone griddle cake in which the saleratus had not been properly dissolved, all of which; with apt malice, Mrs. Campbell loudly whispered in Edith Ellery's ear. When Mrs. Ellery addressed herself to the postmistress, the Lovering party, at other times never speaking a word, drew together in animated conversation, as though repudiating any suggestion that they might be included in the talk on the other side; while when anything was said to them, Mrs. Campbell always pointedly devoted herself to Edith, who, indeed, was finding much of wicked enjoyment in the situation. Between these two fires, as it were, Mr. and Mrs. Dennison of the I X Bar ranch wavered uncertainly, while Hugh, with that fatuous blindness peculiar to his sex, wandered about in hopeful effort to bring everybody together and infuse a spirit of general sociability into the company.

Poor Nelsine found her nerves torn to tatters, as she confided to Edith in passing. Blinded by the intense glare of the fire, she had stumbled into an irrigating ditch in coming up the hill, and now, with feet wet and icy cold, she was unsuccessfully striving to find rest upon a chair that, however she might readjust it upon the uncertain ground, would only precariously wobble on three legs. Thus handicapped, she was making heroic effort to be bright and chatty, while Mrs. Lov-

Digitized by Google

ering at her right hand, gingerly holding up the ends of the garment she called a "polonay," loudly lamented the wearing of her best clothes but to expose them to the dew, at the same time breaking forth in occasional bewailing for the waste of good kindling wood going on before their eyes.

Mr. Campbell, naturally of cautious temperament, had introduced another element of disquiet by his concern lest the flying sparks should fire the range across the *coulée*, or the wind should change and endanger the barns, until Ellery, who had, in fact, builded better than he knew, was altogether unnerved and disquieted. A fire in earnest was not a pleasant possibility to contemplate, and especially on this night, when all the men belonging on the place, with the exception of Brown, had gone to the picnic and dance with which the neighbouring hamlet of Cottonwood was celebrating the day.

Edith, who always said that in some previous state of existence she was sure that she had been a Parsee, was finding exquisite enjoyment in the revelry of flame. Her breath came quicker, her nerves tingled with excitement, as her eyes followed the writhing red arms, that with almost diabolical prescience were ever reaching out higher and yet higher, snatching at the farthermost twigs with derisive cries and hisses of mad

Digitized by Google

triumph, gnawing, tearing, and beating down the mighty mass, while throwing down a glowing shower of burned-out husks into the depths of the abyss, each branch, as it fell, for the instant glorified, as though the subtle touch of life passed in new beauty from its erstwhile growth on earth. "We might fancy ourselves a lot of shipwrecked sailors burning a beacon fire in well-nigh hopeless appeal for help," she said, more to herself than to Mrs. Campbell, beside whom she was sitting. "The rest of the world seems such worlds away."

"'*Twould* be kind of sociable to see the light of somethin' more'n the moon and stars by night, wouldn't it?—not that there's much moon to-night. Goodness knows I hope it's goin' to get up in time to light us home, with all them gates," anxiously peering up at the heavens, while, wholly oblivious to Ellery's feeling as author of the entertainment, she sat with her back squarely turned to the blaze. "It's more'n twenty year since I've lived where I could see the light of a neighbour's house by night. Folks back East, where they're jest natchelly treading on one another's toes, they're so thick, don't know what that means. Seems kind of lonesome, for a fact, once in a while, especially in times of sickness. But I ain't complainin'," snapping a meaning glance at the Lovering party. "Land knows I'd

Digitized by Google

want to weed out my neighbours some before I went gettin' 'em any nearer."

"But you have your family," murmured Edith vaguely, half laughing as she caught sight of Nelsine's despairing face. "And did I understand you to say that your boys are at the Cottonwood picnic?"

"Yes; they jest natchelly had to go," she declared, with a sniff of unbounded contempt for such frivolities. "Boys will be boys; an' mighty few of 'em ever outgrow all the man foolishness that's born in 'em. Your men all gone too, I notice, 'ceptin' that horse trainer. How'd it happen Artalissa didn't get to go? I und'stand Jim Kittery arst her."

"I'm sure I don't know," returned the girl, after an instant of hesitation, her glance involuntarily straying back to where Artalissa was standing. Paul Brown was beside her, his laugh at the moment ringing out gaily in response to some sally only his ear had heard.

"What a flirt that girl is!" put in little Mrs. Dennison, with lively interest. "I hear she is all for that horse trainer now."

"That horse trainer!" — that was the way these people spoke of him, just as they might have said "That sheep herder!" "That stable boy!" or "That tramp!" And they were right. Whatever he had been, and however romantic

Digitized by Google

fancy might have played with the possibilities of his story, he was of his own accord but this —that horse trainer, nothing more. So ran Edith's thoughts as the simple gossip babbled on.

"'N' Jim Kittery is all for that horse trainer too," laughed Mrs. Campbell, quite delighted with her own wit. "'N' that horse trainer had better watch out fer himself if Jim comes home from the dance drunk to-night, as he most likely will. He only needs to get a little bit uglier to see some shootin' done on this ranch. The boys was hectorin' him this mornin'. I was inside the window-curtain peekin' out while they was waitin' for my boys to saddle up; and they was laughin' at Jim because this other feller'd cut him out. 'Well,' says he, lookin' for all the world like a big bulldog, 'jest you wait,' says he, ''n' see who comes out ahead. I'll be even with him yet, 'n' don't you forget it.' If the boys would only leave him alone; but they ain't natchelly got any more sense! They think it's nothin' but fun to keep maddin' him more and more; and Artalissa, she don't help matters none, I'll warrant. There's jest enough cussedness in that girl to find victuals 'n' drink in makin' trouble."

"I know," put in little Mrs. Dennison, eager to contribute her quota. "Jim was in an awful

Digitized by Google

tantrum the night of the dance. He got riled somehow, and over he went to the barn, swearing like all possessed about Brown, who just happened along while Jim was talking, but said never a word, just standing there cool as a cucumber and taking it all in. Jim wasn't saying anything about Artalissa; he was only running on about Brown being a fool bronco buster who set himself up for a masher and all that. All of a sudden Brown steps up in front of him, saying nothing, but just laughing in his face. Everybody jumped, seeing Kittery reach for his gun, but it happened he'd left it with his saddle, and some of the boys just sneaked away and hustled it out of sight somewhere. And Brown only stood there grinning in a don't-care sort of fashion, looking at him, they say, just like he looks an ugly horse in the eye; and next thing Jim kind of quieted down and moseyed off without another word. But my husband says it looks to him like the fellow was just laying low for another chance, when there wouldn't be so many around to see fair play."

"No question but he's jest natchelly crazy after Artalissa. I know for certain that she let on she'd marry him awhile ago."

"You don't say!" drawing a long breath of delighted excitement. "But I don't know as I blame her for picking the horse trainer of the

Digitized by Google

two. He looks as though he could take care of himself too, at a pinch."

"Oh, if he had a fair show; but the pinch may come when Brown has his back turned. Jim's a bad man when he sets out to be. Remember that summer when he was workin' for the 333 outfit—or was it before you come? Sure enough; I guess it was. Well, he went down to Cheyenne on a tear, 'n' got shootin' at a bartender. They'd had some argument about somethin', 'n' the bartender turned around to reach somethin' out of the refrigerator, when Jim pulled his gun an' went blazin' away at him. The ice box was big, 'n' the fellow was small, so in he dove, head first, his legs jest stickin' out like a pair of calipers. And there stood Jim, blazin' away, jest contrivin' to miss a leg at every shot, havin' a better time than anybody. Said afterward he was jest doin' it for a joke—to see the legs wriggle; but the other fellow didn't see it that way, 'n' old man Wilson, of the 333 outfit, jest had to move heaven 'n' earth to get Jim out of jail in time for hayin'."

"And I heard that he got in some trouble with a sheep herder over in Converse County; shot him, didn't he?" said Mrs. Dennison. "How did he get out of that?"

"Oh, he got a change of venue over to Buffalo, where they ain't got much use for sheep

Digitized by Google

men, 'n' then he claimed that the herder reached for his gun first; an' bein' that the herder was dead 'n' wasn't there to tell his story, they let Jim off—that was the way of it," explained Mrs. Campbell, proud to know all about it. "It's a pity he got off so easy."

"Maybe he won't find it such plain sailing if he tackles the horse trainer," remarked Mrs. Dennison, appreciatively regarding Paul Brown's stalwart form, showing in dark silhouette against the background of flame. "He doesn't look like the kind of a man that would stand still and let somebody fill him full of shot."

"But you can't tell what he might have to do with a fellow like Jim Kittery," retorted Mrs. Campbell, with grewsome emphasis. "I've often thought that his bein' so handy with his gun might have somethin' to do with Artalissa's bein' so sweet to him. He may have got her scared up. He's a bad man clear through, let me tell you. And if the horse trainer ain't anxious for trouble he'd better watch out for himself."

The bonfire burned low at last, and it was but little after nine o'clock when the guests took their departure, Mrs. Lovering loudly lamenting that they had not gone sooner, which, however natural in view of the many gates and the uncertain character of the roads, was yet hardly

Digitized by Google

calculated to raise the drooping spirits of the weary host and hostess.

"Thank goodness, it is over at last!" quoth Nelsine devoutly, regarding her soaked shoes by the light of the parlour lamp. "And when I have them here again——!" the tone eloquent of grim and unalterable resolution.

"It is one of the inexplicable mysteries of life—the way a woman will insist upon eating crow, only to fall to kicking about it afterward," her husband parenthetically observed, addressing the ceiling.

"Now, Hugh, you know perfectly well that we *had* to have them!" cried Nelsine warmly. "They had all invited us, over and over again, until I was simply ashamed to look one of them in the face."

"And now they will begin by inviting us all over again—to spend the afternoon and stay to tea," groaned Hugh miserably. "But I tell you right now, Nelsine, that when the evil days come, I shall have other engagements. I positively will not be killed with kindness."

"When I take up my desert claim, I think I shall look up a more deserted section than this," remarked Edith, yawning dismally. "I forgive you this time, Nelsine, but I trust that your social obligations are now wholly discharged."

"O Edith, how can you—when you have

Digitized by Google

helped me out so beautifully, too! It ought to be such a satisfaction to you."

"It is. I can not remember when I have felt more perfectly virtuous and happy. I deserve to sleep the sleep of the just, I am sure; and so, good-night, dear."

Alone in her room, however, slumber seemed far from her eyelids, and she fell to pacing the floor, at last taking from her portfolio a letter written to Marshall Woodbury that day, thoughtfully reading it through. There was a certain satisfaction in seeing her determination committed to paper, a positive joy in turning from the morbid thoughts that had filled every waking moment of these last few days, in looking ahead to the fair, restful life that awaited her, a life promising every good that experience had taught her it were well to have. There was somewhat of the old haunting disappointment that her happiness was not quite the supreme emotion of which she had dreamed; but she would rather condemn the foolish fancies bred of schoolgirl romance than quarrel with her lot, which, over and over again, she told herself, was all that she could ask. She had chosen wisely and dispassionately this one whom her reason approved. She admired, respected him beyond all the men of her acquaintance; naturally she could not fail to love him in due time, in such

Digitized by Google

measure as love might be essential for happiness. And, indeed, she was quite happy now!—she told herself this with a sort of fierce insistence. Only to-night she was all worn out from the efforts of the day, and depressed from listening to the gossip of those tiresome women. It was grewsome to hear murder discussed as a possibility at their very door. Of course she put no credence in it. She knew that, like children inventing ghost stories, they but imagined horrors for their own delight. And yet, she herself had seen such a look of evil on Jim Kittery's bold and reckless face, a look of menace directed toward his handsome rival, which she trembled now to remember. The fellow was nearly crazed with jealous rage—there could be no question about that; and as those women had said, it might need but a straw's weight of further irritation to make anything possible. Particularly might this be so if he returned from the dance to-night inflamed with drink.

Restlessly walking back and forth, she presently opened the door leading out upon the piazza, stepping outside. The moon, large and red as the flame that had burned at the bonfire's heart, was just rising above the trees, the delicately clothed branches marked against the glowing disk like a tracery of exquisite lace. A shawl of Nelsine's was lying across a chair, and wrap-

Digitized by Google

ping it about her shoulders, she slipped into the hammock that faced the eastern sky, luxuriously adjusting the pillows behind her head.

There was a silvery play of light, like spangles on the gown of a dancing girl, glancing among the polished stems of the vine leaves, while the dainty network of shadows spread over the floor deepened and darkened, growing ever clearer with the advancing light, like a photographic film in the developing bath. Above the soft whispers among the trees came the soothing murmur of the creek, with its subtle mockery of every voice she had ever heard, every musical sound known to earth; while the heavy, languorous scent of growing things, voicelessly inviting the caresses of the night moths, fell upon the senses like an anodyne. Edith lay in a sort of lethargic content, missing nothing of sight or sound, yet scarcely conscious of anything. She was weary of thinking, and joyed in the rest, idly wondering if perhaps death might not be like this, to lie at ease forever, forgetting all cares of earth, always soothed and made dreamily glad by the soft lullaby of winds and the infinite harmony of Nature.

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIII

How long she had been asleep she could not tell, when she found herself starting up in terror, with a feeling that she had been rudely awakened, that something was amiss. She fancied there had been—or had she but dreamed it, that sound as of pistol shots? Had the boys come home from the dance, and was Jim——?

She sat up in the hammock, listening breathlessly, her hands unconsciously pressed against her beating heart. The moon was now high in the sky, and the sibilant whispering among the trees seemed louder than it had been before, as the breeze gently buffeted the willing branches hither and thither. The vine leaves rustled softly in the murmurous silence, and the dark wings of a moth stirred caressingly a pendulous spray of the wild cucumber bloom. Edith, shivering a little, more from nervousness than the chill of the night, presently assured that her fears had been but the outcome of a troubled dream, was stealing softly to her room, when her steps were arrested by a far-off sound. Something seemed to be falling, and breaking and

Digitized by Google

cracking as it fell. And then, of a sudden, she became conscious of an oppressive smell of smoke, which had been in her nostrils all the time. Fire!—that was it! The wind had risen, and—was it the barns?

She almost flew around the house, looking up the hill; but all seemed as still as the dead in that fair landscape of gray and silver. She fancied that she heard the sound of horses' feet in the distance, but she was hardly sure of that as she listened more intently; and, in any event, what could that signify? When might one not hear such sounds at K 6 ranch? She almost laughed aloud now, in reaction from the unreasoning panic that had possessed her, looking about in leisurely appreciation of the scene. Never had she seen moonlight more glorious. She could almost distinguish the colours of the wild flowers starring the turf, as she strolled up the hill a little way to look at the remains of the bonfire. Dense clouds of smoke were still curling up from the *coulée*, while now and then a burned-out branch fell to the bottom with a nerve-racking crackle. This naturally accounted for the noises that had awakened her; the snapping sounds might well seem as pistol shots in a dreamer's ears, and, altogether reassured, she walked on until she had reached the bank of the ravine, idly watching the dainty play of flame

Digitized by Google

stirred by the wind among the ashes at the bottom.

She was turning to go back when she stopped short, startled anew by a certain something that seemed like the figure of a man standing by the corral gate. Her nerves now under control, she jumped at once to the conclusion that the boys had returned, after all, and had been up at the barn unsaddling their horses; this explained the sounds of the horses' feet that she had heard a moment ago. But while, now broad awake, she was not disturbed by the possibility, she had no wish to be discovered here, feeling how singular it might appear to those callow cowboys that she should be wandering forth alone at such an hour. And so she stood still, as she hoped unobserved, while she vexedly studied the motionless blotch against the gate, questioning as she looked whether imagination might not be playing her false. The interval of doubt was short. The figure plainly moved, turning in her direction, and as he came into the clear moonlight a moment later, she recognised Paul Brown. Flight was now out of the question, and she stood apathetically awaiting him.

"Miss Ellery—is it really you?" he exclaimed, as he came near. "I was going to the barns, thinking that I had heard a noise up there not altogether regular, when I caught

Digitized by Google

sight of you here, almost believing for the moment that you must be a ghost."

"Only ghosts have any business abroad at such an hour of the night, have they?" she coldly returned. "And that being the case, I shall get myself into the house as promptly as possible."

"But one moment, Miss Ellery, *please*," he urged, peremptorily barring the way. "Won't you tell me how I have offended you?"

"Offended me—you?" her glance indifferently sweeping him from head to foot. "Aren't you a rather imaginative person, Mr. Brown?"

"If you could guess what it means to me," he went on impetuously. "I had been so proud, so happy, to think for a moment that we were friends, and then——"

"You must excuse me if I suggest that this is hardly the time for a discussion as to whether we are friends or enemies," she frigidly interrupted. "Personally, I must say that it is a matter in which I feel a very slight concern; and as I am very sleepy—will you allow me to pass, please?"

"Oh, if you put it like that!—I beg pardon, Miss Ellery. Allow me to bid you good-night."

Womanlike, no sooner had she gained her point than she wavered in the purpose. "Are

Digitized by Google

the boys home from the dance yet?" she irrelevantly demanded, turning back when she had taken a few steps.

"No; they won't be back before morning, probably. They make a night of it when they celebrate in this part of the country," he answered, his manner now as cold as her own.

Still she waited, her fingers nervously twisting themselves together. "They were talking of that man Jim this evening," she abruptly remarked at length, coming a step nearer. "They were saying that he is a bad man, in your western sense of the term."

"I believe he does rather pose as a terror sometimes," he indifferently rejoined, looking at her with listless questioning. Why should they waste time discussing Jim?

"And I think"—she went on, speaking with a certain prim dignity, albeit with palpable effort—"I think you ought to be told that he has been making threats against you on account of your devotion to Artalissa."

"My devotion to Artalissa! Well, upon my word!" he ejaculated, laughing harshly. "Thank you so much for warning me, Miss Ellery. It is so very kind—especially that delicate little reference to Artalissa. I couldn't have expected it. While as to expressing my appreciation—words simply fail me."

Digitized by Google

"I might have known that you would take it like that—that I should get no thanks for meddling with your affairs!" she exclaimed, angry tears in her eyes. In truth, she could have bitten her tongue out now for the impulsive words.

"But I do thank you, Miss Ellery; haven't I said so?" the tone bitterly ironical. "It shows a solicitude that is really flattering. But, to quiet your kind anxiety in respect to Jim, I don't think he will develop any very murderous mania until my devotion to Artalissa"—angry emphasis upon the words—"shall have advanced a little beyond the bald acquaintance it has been to date."

"I don't know what your idea of a bald acquaintance may be," she wrathfully returned, something in the scoffing tone touching her to the quick, "but I may as well tell you that Jim was watching you the other night. He saw everything."

"The other night," he vaguely repeated, staring at her now in surprise. "I don't know what night you mean, Miss Ellery, or what on earth there was for him to see. May I ask you to explain?"

Edith hesitated, glancing down the hill as though half minded to run away and leave the question unanswered. "It was the night of the

Digitized by Google

dance," she said at length, looking away. "He was following when you walked down the field with Artalissa. I happened to be standing in the shadows of the trees, and I saw—everything; and from the expression of his face as he sprang aside into the brush when you came back—well, I think you would do well to look out for him. Pardon the advice, please, and—good-night!"

"But, Miss Ellery, you must not go without telling me more than this," he breathlessly protested, coming close beside her, "for what you are talking about, I know no more than the dead. I was walking down the field that night, trying to muster courage to try and find you, if you will allow me to be wholly frank, when I met Artalissa, who turned and came with me. I did not ask her; did not want her; but what could I do? We walked a few rods, and then—simply turned and walked back again. I can imagine nothing more harmless. I can't even remember what we talked about, although I am sure all creation might have heard it and welcome. Now I think of it, she said there was a bug or something on her shoulder—it was only a bugaboo of her imagination—but I was trying to brush it off. Was it that which roused Jim's wrath? Perhaps my manner was a little too free and easy; Artalissa is not exacting; but I should not expect that Jim

Digitized by Google

would be hypercritical in such a matter. And if I am in danger of being shot for this——"

"Was that all there was to it?" turning upon him sharply, but swiftly adding, as again she turned away, "but you need not answer the question. It is nothing to me."

"In Heaven's name, what else should there be to it?" he breathlessly exclaimed, ignoring her last words. "If you could possibly have thought——"

"Those half lights are confusing. I am sure Jim——" but she left the sentence unfinished, with a sudden accession of hauteur. "But I had no idea of prying into your affairs—of seeming to ask any explanation. It was only that I am sure Jim thought——"

"Bother Jim!" he interrupted, with an unsteady laugh. "I beg pardon, but really, Miss Ellery, what you thought is all I care about knowing."

"And what I thought is not of the slightest consequence. You have made it clear, however, that I was mistaken; and it seems to me that it would be much more to your advantage to make it equally clear to Jim. Good-night!"

"But, Miss Ellery, please—one word."

"I ought to be going in. It is horribly late," but she lingered, waiting for him to speak.

Digitized by Google

He stood looking at her for a moment in silence, his heart in his eyes. "I have no right to infer—anything, Miss Ellery," he said then, as if he found a certain difficulty in speaking at all; "but it seems to me that you have been just a little bit unjust to me in a way, and that, perhaps, you almost owe me something in the line of recompense. And I am audacious enough to crave a great favour."

"Indeed," her voice rather weak, her head turned away. "And what may that favour be, Mr. Brown?"

"Simply that you should stay with me here—let me enjoy your society as a friend—for just a few minutes longer. Is that so very much to ask?"

"Preposterous—at this hour," murmured the girl, with an air of definite refusal.

"They tell me that you are going away in a few days."

"Yes," as he waited tentatively.

"Then in all our lives I shall probably never have an opportunity to ask any favour of you again."

"But this is so perfectly ridiculous," half smiling. "I have been here too long already."

"Then ten minutes more will scarcely signify."

"Will ten minutes satisfy you?"

Digitized by Google

"I will not ask for any more," evading direct answer to the question. "Ah, thank you," his voice tremulous with triumph as she seated herself on a bench. He could have shouted for joy. Never could he have dared to hope for such good fortune as this, won, as it seemed, by sheer bravado.

"It really seems too lovely to go indoors," she murmured, as though in apology to her own conscience.

"It certainly does," he emphatically agreed. "And now, what shall we talk about? Is there anything else that you will let me explain to you?—or are you tired of personalities?"

"I am afraid you will be before I have done," she returned, laughing embarrassedly; "for indeed, Mr. Brown, I did not stay altogether to please you. In fact, I have been wanting to see you—there is something I have been longing to say to you ever since our talk the other Sunday."

"Indeed," an incredulous smile broadening into a low, amused laugh. "Well, I must say that you surprise me. I did not dream that you could be induced to favour me with a word on any subject—in fact, I should have considered myself in luck these last few days if I had been given but a glance. May I ask——"

"It is about your father," she hurriedly in-

Digitized by Google

terrupted. "I think you ought to forgive him, after all these years."

"It seems to me that you rather have the cart before the horse, Miss Ellery," he returned, after a moment of surprised silence. "How about his forgiving me?"

"But he has forgiven you long ago; he is your father. And if you would go to him now——"

"He would be so proud of me, would he not?" he bitterly interrupted.

"Why should he not be?" she retorted, with eager assurance. "You can hardly wish me to begin paying you compliments, Mr. Brown—to waste time saying pretty things; but——"

"Please finish the sentence, Miss Ellery, if it is anything kind; you can not think how I am starved for kindness," he pleaded, as she hesitated. "But perhaps you would better not, after all. If you should make me drunk with happiness——"

"Oh, if you are going to talk like that——" rising indignantly.

"But I am not going to talk like that. It was only a slip of the tongue. Please forgive it, and don't go, Miss Ellery. Let us discuss this matter of my father. You say that I should forgive him—as though all the hardness and

Digitized by Google

wrong were on my side. But do you know, with all my bitterness—and I am very bitter sometimes—I still have an inexpressible affection for my father. I think he made mistakes in my training, but he meant it all for the best. I was an awful disappointment to him; and, Heaven knows, I deserve all the trouble that has fallen to my share. I am no saint, but I am not quite the hardened sinner that you seem to think."

"But why will you not go back to him and say all this?"

"I used to dream of going home, when I should have done great things to condone the past. It would be the greatest thing in the world to me—equivalent to being canonized—if I could hear my father say just once, 'My son, I am proud of you.'"

"But he would say it. He could not help saying it when he had seen you." She forgot how much the words implied in the eagerness to gain her point. "He could not look at you without being proud that he had given such a man to the world. He would know at a glance that your life had been brave and true, that your record had been clean; and he would give you the larger measure of credit for the years when everything has been against you."

"Thank you—oh, my——" but the impetu-

Digitized by Google

ous words came to an abrupt stop, and he almost turned his back upon her until, perceiving that she had half risen from her seat, he again plunged into speech in the hope of arresting the movement. "I have thought a good deal about going home in these last few days—since our Sunday talk," he said, his voice very low. "I could not help remembering what an advantage it would give me to stand once more before the world as my father's son. It was selfishness, you see, not the penitence befitting the returning prodigal. And do you suppose I could look my father in the face if I should go sneaking back to him only for my own advantage? I am bad enough, Heaven knows, but I am not quite so contemptible as that."

"But you would not go back wholly for your own advantage. You would go because you love him and would like to be friends again," she urged.

"But not entirely for that reason," he grimly insisted. "Now that the selfish consideration has come into my thoughts it would stick like a bur. And to go back with such a feeling—it would be like obtaining money under false pretences. Even to gain my very heart's desire, if that were possible, I could not do it. Do you understand, Miss Ellery?—and do you forgive me?"

Digitized by Google

"I am afraid that I don't quite understand; but it seems to me that you are morbid and unreasonable in so picking your motives to pieces," she said, her smile rather strained. Womanlike, she was more chagrined to find that she lacked the power to bend him in accordance with her wishes than for failure in the actual point involved.

"If the time ever comes when I can go back with no selfish motive, go back asking for nothing but a welcome; if the time ever comes when I can be sure of that welcome; when I can go back feeling that I am not to be received as a prodigal repentantly fleeing from the husks and the swine—well, perhaps. Meanwhile, I wish you could know how it hurts me to refuse any request of yours, Miss Ellery; and I only wish you would ask something else, something having to do with yourself, if such a request were possible, that you might see how gladly I would do anything, sacrifice anything, that might give you a moment's pleasure."

"It is very kind of you to say so," she stiffly returned, ironical emphasis on the verb, "but you have refused the only thing that I could ask."

"And now you are vexed with me!" he exclaimed, his glance following her helplessly as she arose as though to leave him. "But

Digitized by Google

—O Miss Ellery! can't you see—don't you know?"

"I think your attitude is altogether morbid and unreasonable, so far as I can pretend to understand it at all," she coldly returned, her eyes upon the smouldering *débris* of the bonfire over the bank.

"Morbid!—I am daft!" he vehemently exclaimed, coming close beside her. "No man was ever less in condition to reason out the matter clearly. If I dared to explain—to tell you all that is in my mind and heart! But—oh, you are not going?"

"Indeed, I must, Mr. Brown," she declared, in a breathless little voice that yet was rarely sweet. "I am afraid to think what time it must be. And if anybody should see us—— I would better go around by the bunk house, don't you think?" turning back to him with an apprehensive look, after a sweeping survey of the darkened buildings below.

"The farther around the better," he returned, with a little laugh, quickly adding in reassuring tone, "but I am sure you need not be nervous, Miss Ellery; there isn't a soul stirring besides ourselves."

"Heaven grant it!" she dubiously responded. "It is lucky there are no dogs to bark."

"How does it happen there are not?" he idly

Digitized by Google

asked, hoping to divert her mind from the fears that were quite evidently growing upon her, as they walked side by side down the hill. "This is the only ranch I know of where there are not dogs galore."

"Oh, Mrs. Ellery dreads having them about on account of the children. She does not care for pets, and she has a mortal horror of hydrophobia. But—what was that?" laying her hand upon his arm in sudden panic. "It sounded like —I don't know what."

"It was only a falling leaf," he murmured, quickly covering the small, cold fingers in a tender, reassuring pressure. "Are you really so frightened? I shall be sorry that I persuaded you to stay, if you are going to be oppressed with such an awful sense of guilt. Why need you? What have you done, except to make me happy for a little while—such a few minutes out of a lifetime; and the little birds that tell secrets are not abroad at this time of the night. Nobody will ever be the wiser and nobody ever the worse, while I shall be the richer for a sweet memory that surely you will not grudge me now."

"Oh, I don't know," she muttered miserably. "What if somebody should be looking out and see us coming back together? It is not impossible."

Digitized by Google

"Would you feel less worried if I should leave you to go on alone?"

"I think it might be better, if you don't mind."

"I do mind. I needn't fib about it, need I? When shall I ever see you alone again like this? It is my opportunity, and every moment counts; but—it must be just as you prefer, of course."

"Then—thank you so much, and—good-night!"

"But—we are friends again, Miss Ellery?"

"Oh, certainly; of course."

"Once, in token of friendship, you shook hands with me at parting, Miss Ellery."

She laughed softly, a hint of coquetry in her manner as she halted above him on the steep bank. "How absurd you are!" she murmured, reaching out to him a slim, soft hand with a little air of shy reluctance. With tremulous eagerness he clasped it in both his own.

"Yes; but it would be so easy for me to be more absurd," he whispered, drawing a step nearer; "absurd enough to tell you——"

"Oh, please—you must not!" she exclaimed, the small hand struggling to free itself.

"No; I will not. But you shall tell me if it is true—this story I have heard—that you are engaged to be married. Is it so, sweetheart?"

Digitized by Google

the word of caress but a whisper she could be hardly sure that she heard. "Tell me."

"Yes, it is true," looking him squarely in the face with a little air of defiance, as she snatched away her hand. "Will you congratulate me, Mr. Brown?"

"Congratulate you," he repeated, with an odd smile, coming so close that she could feel his hot breath on her cheek. "Are you so happy? But I beg pardon—of course you are. All the same, isn't it considered the correct thing to reserve the congratulations for the lucky man?—one's courtesy to the lady taking only the form of good wishes? You know how sincerely I can offer those, Miss Ellery. I hope you may be happy—with all my heart! What! are you going? Have I said enough already—or perhaps too much? Ah, little girl, whatever my sins of omission or commission, to err is human; and you must forgive, because you are divine. Good-night, and—God bless you always, dear!"

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIV

THERE was a stir of surprise next morning when it developed that Jim Kittery had shaken the dust of K 6 ranch from his feet and definitely retired from his harassing courtship. The boys who had been with him at the Cottonwood picnic brought back the horse he had ridden away, with the explanation that he had encountered friends at the festivities, with whom he had gone on to the Flying W ranch, some twenty miles across the country. There was a curt message for Mr. Ellery, stating, in the local idiom common in such leavetakings, that he wanted his "time"; while he further directed that his belongings should be duly forwarded by the mail carrier.

All interest in this closing page of Jim's poor little romance was quickly forgotten, however, in the more serious loss which had befallen the place. When Paul Brown, who made a point of always caring for his horse with his own hands, went to the stable that morning, it was to find the animal missing. There was for the moment no uneasiness on this score, the first inference being that the halter had not been securely fast-

Digitized by Google

ened the night before. Black Prince, always glorying in motion, had a trick of venting his delight in a shrill, triumphant little whinny whenever he was led from the barn, and Brown at once guessed that it was this sound, but half recognised, that had roused him from sleep the night before, when he had been diverted from his purpose of going through the barns by meeting Miss Ellery. He had a shamed sense of irritation that he had not kept to his duty then, even though he might thereby have lost a few minutes of that precious interview. It did not occur to him yet that anything serious had occurred; he was but fretted with the problem of how the horse, having got out of the barn, had managed to escape from the corral, when he distinctly remembered shutting the gates himself the night before. There was, moreover, a certain shame in the masterful spirit of the man that he had evidently been tricked and beaten by the canny animal.

But while he was examining the fastenings of the furthermost gate, the boys sent out for the horse herd returned with their charge, bringing the startling information that Black Prince was nowhere to be found in the field, while the bay filly that Ellery had planned to give to his sister, by far the most valuable colt on the place, was also missing. And then it became apparent to

Digitized by Google

everybody in a breath that the place must have been visited by rustlers the night before.

Hugh Ellery, who, while forever renewing heroic resolve as to early rising, yet rarely appeared to demand his comfortable breakfast before the sun was well up in the heavens, was now ruthlessly awakened, amid such excitement as had never before been known at K 6 ranch. Not a man on the place but had theories and suggestions which he would vociferously advance, resulting in a very Babel of tongues about the barns. Suspicion pointed to a fellow who had been discharged from the place some six weeks before, a tramp who had been picked up in Cheyenne when they happened to be in pressing need of a man, necessity keeping him employed only long enough to earn the undying ill-will of every associate by his laziness and surly temper. It appeared certain that whoever had visited the barns had been familiar with all the conditions, else he had never ventured so near the house when there were so many good horses to be roped up in the field along with the bay filly.

Locating the route of the thief or thieves was considerably simplified by natural conditions, which pointed to a northerly course. The trail up the creek was difficult in broad daylight, while the opposite direction led straight to the buildings of the I X Bar ranch, a veritable *cul-de-sac*

Digitized by Google

under the circumstances. The stream, for the most part guarded by steep banks on either side, had no available fording place for several miles, save just here, from which it was evident that either the horses had been driven across just below the bridge—the chances being in that event that somebody must have heard them—or else they must have been taken back through the corral and over the hills beyond. By this way there were few fences to hinder. The first field contained some six thousand acres; the one beyond was of about the same extent; while outside lay the open, Government land. Another thing could be argued with absolute certainty: the course of the rustler must inevitably have been planned with reference to water, and Brown was promptly persuaded that his own Lost River country was the objective point, finding evidence in support of his theory in the little *coulée* above the place where the bonfire had burned the night before. This deep cut, running from a small reservoir in the hills above, supplying the house with water from the same stream that had once worn out the deep, narrow pathway, offered but one easy point of crossing from one sheer bank to the other. Here, at a place where the walls fell away a little, a road had been shelved out, running at an acute angle down to the trickling little runlet of the reservoir's waste water, and

Digitized by Google

up on the other side, where the grassy bank rose to a considerable hill. Carefully examining the oozy mud at the bottom, Brown was sure that he discovered the peculiar shoe marks of his own horse.

As quickly as might be, all were in the saddle, Ellery sharply complaining at Jim's absence at a time when any defection in the ranks so seriously counted. It was planned that the party should divide, and, in the local idiom, "ride the fences," hoping to soon discover the point where the fugitives had passed through, which would serve as guidance for further pursuit. The northern country was hilly and broken, and progress in the night with the embarrassment of two or more spirited horses would probably have been slow, however skilled the rider. There seemed a strong probability that, with daylight and fresh horses to favour them, the pursuers might soon sight their quarry; or, failing that, they hoped at least to settle the course of the runaways, when an expedition properly equipped to follow and camp on the trail, would have reasonable assurance of ultimate success.

Paul Brown's part in the pursuit, however, was brought to an untimely stop. They had proceeded only as far as the *coulée*, the cavalcade advancing in single file down the steep

Digitized by Google

incline. Brown was leaning forward in the saddle, eagerly pointing out where he had discovered the telltale tracks, when of a sudden his horse began furiously bucking, the saddle at the same time slipping in such fashion that he had no time to save himself from an ugly fall, rendered worse by the yielding, pebbly soil down which he helplessly rolled. A moment later, dizzy and bewildered, he had struggled back to the horse, now held in momentary quiet by the rope which one of the boys had promptly thrown over his neck, with exasperated astonishment examining the saddle that had played him such a scurvy trick.

"Well, if that doesn't beat the devil!" he incredulously ejaculated after an instant, regarding the parted ends of a strap, while the others crowded around to see. The ladigo straps on the off side of the saddle had been plainly cut, and so deftly that the tightening of the cinches had but served to weaken the places, reserving the actual breaking away until some such strain had been brought to bear as was involved in the descent of this steep place. No more fiendish attempt to baffle pursuit could have been devised, while the wonder was that the result had not been more serious. The horse, a young bronco recently broken, as he felt the saddle slip, had been frightened into

Digitized by Google

a mad paroxysm of bucking, always to be expected in this sort of animal; and with this bad bit of road, Brown might esteem himself in luck to have fared no worse.

The other boys were all upon the ground, anxiously looking to the condition of their own trappings, which, however, were found to be all right.

"Your saddle was next the door, you know," Ellery observed to Brown. "Undoubtedly the fellow fell upon that first, but was frightened off before getting any farther with his villainous work." But the other accepted the explanation in grim silence.

"I must go back and rig up new ladigos," he sullenly remarked, feeling an ugly wrench in his ankle as he sprang upon the horse bareback, the saddle held in front of him. "You fellows hurry on. I'll overtake you in a few minutes. And look sharp along the north fence; you'll find a break there somewhere."

He found, when he dismounted at the corral, that his ankle was giving him poignant pain. Already it had swollen until the pressure of the heavy riding boot was like a clamp of steel, almost unbearable. He hurriedly drew his knife and cut the lacing that adjusted the fit, shoelike, over instep and ankle, sharply extending the opening at either end. For a mo-

Digitized by Google

ment there was a sense of relief, but to be followed by a throbbing pain more intense than before, and in very wantonness of ill temper he reached down to tear out the leather tongue that, relieved of the restraining lacing, flapped irritatingly up and down as he walked. The acute physical pain, the harassing feeling that he ought to stop and bandage the foot, and perchance exchange the heavy boot for looser wear, added to his eager haste to be gone, altogether induced a feeling akin to madness, in which frame of mind he was limping toward the tool house, where he knew some spare ladigo straps were hanging, when Mrs. Ellery's musical voice called to him from the gate.

"Oh, you are not gone; how fortunate!" she exclaimed. "I want my horse saddled, Mr. Brown; will you call one of the boys to attend to it, please?"

"I'm afraid the boys are all a mile away by this time, Mrs. Ellery," he answered over his shoulder, with grudging civility; adding, by way of the hint he felt was excusable under the circumstances, "we are on the track of the rustlers, and every moment counts, you know."

But Mrs. Ellery, always persuaded of the entire reasonableness of her purposes, could hardly imagine such an anarchical condition of things as that anybody should seriously object

Digitized by Google

to rendering her a service. "Indeed?—how nice!" she inconsequentially returned, her pretty face alight with smiles. "Then, if you are actually on the trail of them, a few minutes one way or the other will not count, and perhaps you will not mind just slipping the saddle on for me before you go." There was a moment's silence before she added, now with a hint of displeased surprise in her manner, "Artalissa has just discovered that she is out of yeast cakes, and we must have bread, you know, whether a horse is left on the place or not. Miss Ellery has offered to ride over to Campbell's and borrow some; so if you will kindly bring around the horse for her——"

For Miss Ellery!—this put a different face upon it. "Certainly, Mrs. Ellery; I shall be very glad," he said, turning back to the barn.

He had just finished saddling when Edith, in her riding habit, came hurrying across the lawn. "I wanted to see you! I have fairly run away from Mrs. Ellery," she breathlessly exclaimed, as he met her at the gate. "You have not mentioned the noise you heard last night?"

"No; I felt a little cheap, to tell the truth, to feel that I had been fairly upon the ground, and then let them run off my horse from under my very nose. And besides," his eyes seeking

Digitized by Google

hers in deprecating inquiry; "I did not know —your nervousness last night was somewhat contagious; and it occurred to me as barely possible that Mrs. Ellery might have heard you as you went in. At any rate, I could hardly afford to take the chances of saying anything."

"Oh, she did hear me!" cried the girl in a voice of agony, her cheeks aflame. "I stumbled over a chair—was there ever worse luck? The noise was enough to wake the dead. Nelsine came flying in, thinking that I was in a nightmare or something, perfectly dumbfounded to find me still dressed. I told her that I had fallen asleep in the hammock—which was true as far as it went; but I have not had courage to look her in the face to-day. And now to think that it may all come out——"

"But why should anything come out, Miss Ellery? There is not the slightest necessity——"

"You will not tell of it?" she exclaimed, in an anguish of entreaty. "Oh, promise me that whatever comes up you will not tell of it."

"How can you ask me such a thing?" he protested, with a sort of furious tenderness. "How can you imagine such a possibility? Don't you know that I would die a thousand deaths before I would let you have a moment's

Digitized by Google

unpleasantness because of last night?" He was growing sick and faint with the throbbing pain in his ankle, and the added torment of her doubt seemed more than he could bear. "How can you hurt me by hinting such a thing, when you know—how could you help knowing?—that I am yours, body and soul!—that I could not be unfaithful to you by the fraction of a thought! Why will you torture me so, when you know how wholly I am at your mercy?"

"Hush!—oh, please—you must not say such things," she whispered, turning back to the horse. A mass of wild sunflowers grew rankly beside the corral gate, and in the sudden move she had unconsciously pushed back among them. The ragged petals of a down-turned flower grazed one hot cheek with a touch like an insect. She put up her hand to brush it aside, when suddenly the motion was arrested, and she stood as though turned to stone. It seemed to Brown for the instant that some thought had struck her which she was impulsively considering, hesitating, perhaps longing, to express it; and he waited, looking at her with dumb questioning, a wild, unformulated hope fluttering at his heart, until, the white lips moving but making no sound, she raised her finger and pointed among the weeds.

"My God!" he hoarsely ejaculated then,

Digitized by Google

thrusting her aside with such rude force that she almost fell, while he bent himself to furiously trampling down the softly glittering coil of mottled browns that now he saw for the first time. It was such a combat as he had indifferently met numberless times before; but now in the late perception of the danger, with the instant lost in the instinctive movement to save her, together with his stiffened, almost useless, right foot, his cunning failed him by just so much as left the ugly, swaying head free to throw itself upon his ankle, at just the point exposed by the cutting of the boot a moment before. He had been pale, but now his sunburned face was like a carving in old ivory as he ground his heel upon the still menacing fangs, pausing not until the coil relaxed in quivering surrender to death, while even then, from the force of cowboy habit, he reached down to break off the rattles.

"Will you have them for a souvenir?" he asked, with a wan smile, holding out on his hand the dull husk of corrugated horn. "Nine rattles, you see. He was an old settler."

"A rattlesnake! and my dress brushed right over it!" she gasped, even more pale than he. "And—heavens!—did it bite you? Oh, it can not have bitten you!" wildly wringing her hands, her eyes entreating him to reassure her.

Digitized by Google

"Don't be worried about it, little girl," he urged gently, still smiling. "If there is whisky enough about the place I dare say I shall pull through all right; and if I don't——"

But Edith was flying toward the house, calling out incoherent explanation to Nelsine, who was opportunely coming around the corner. "Where is the whisky?—where?" she cried, seizing upon the bewildered woman and shaking her frenziedly, as though to wrest the information by sheer force. "Oh, I remember—I saw some in your closet. Don't come with me: go and do what you can for him."

"I'll take care of him," exclaimed Artalissa, darting by them as she spoke. When Edith returned with the whisky, a moment later, the girl met her on the piazza, fiercely snatching the bottle from her hand. "I'll take care of him," she exclaimed again, seeming to repel any interference, as she hurried to the bunk house, where Brown had gone.

Nelsine was wild with excitement. "No snake was ever seen so near the house as that before," she cried. "And to think that it might have been one of the children!—where *are* the children?" peering anxiously about the lawn. "I can never feel easy to have them out of my sight for a moment again as long as we live on this dreadful place. O Ralph!

Digitized by Google

—Roy! where are you? Come here this minute!"

"It is not the time to worry about the children: they are all right," put in Edith sharply. "The question is, what can we do to save—him? If we only had a doctor! Can we not send for one?—O Nelsine, we must!"

"But there is not a man on the place to send; he said himself that they were all a mile away when I went up to the corral; and they must be miles farther by this," moaned Nelsine helplessly. "The Campbell boys might go, if we could get at them. The doctor would get here too late, probably; but it is horrible to think of the poor man dying, perhaps, and we all alone on the place. Oh, we never could endure it! I am fairly sick now."

"I will ride over and send one of the Campbell boys for a doctor," exclaimed Edith, setting her teeth hard together. "Don't worry yourselves into hysterics, Nelsine; and do everything you can for him. Remember that it happened —for me!" a sob in her voice as she turned away, running toward the horse that had remained nipping the fresh, sweet grass of the lawn as contentedly as though no shadow had ever fallen upon the emerald surface.

Digitized by Google

"The poor man! It is probably too late to do anything now," hopelessly murmured Nelsine, keeping along beside her; "but you would better go, just the same, Edith; it will be a comfort to us afterward."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XV

UNTIL she reached Campbell's ranch Edith rode like one in a dream. She had a blurred consciousness of dismounting to open gates, with a haunting idea that they had somehow become miraculously multiplied, that never before had there been so many; but not until she drew rein at the post-office door did it occur to her that she had been going at a pace which was unmerciful for that hot morning. The horse was panting painfully, the hair on neck and rump furrowed with moisture.

Mrs. Campbell exclaimed in surprise when she came to the door, her calico gown pinned up in reckless display of a petticoat of the same material, and feet far from fairylike in proportion, a dripping mop cloth in one hand proclaiming the occupation from which she had been called. "For the land's sake!" she cried, when Edith had breathlessly explained her errand. "Ain't the man got eyes in his head? Seems like he can't know enough to go in out of the wet, if he must stand still 'n' let himself get bit with a rattler—him, a man grown! Of course, I'll go

Digitized by Google

right over, though land knows what good it will do. All creation can't do anything but pour whisky down his throat 'n' trust in the Lord."

"But the boys—will one of them go for a doctor?" interrupted Edith impatiently. "We will pay him liberally for the trouble, of course, if only he can get somebody here in time."

"Why, one of the boys would go all right, 'n' not ask a nickel for it either; though, goodness knows——" checking herself abruptly, though hardly knowing why, as she met the look in the girl's eyes. "Oh, well, if you feel to want the doctor, you want him, I s'pose; but the boys have both gone after a load of wood, an' Josiah, he started this mornin' to ride fence. The stock has been breakin' out again lately, 'n' says Josiah at breakfast——"

"Then I must go myself, Mrs. Campbell," interrupted the girl, inflexible resolution showing in the white face. "Will you tell Mrs. Ellery, please?"

"Tell her what?—that you've gone where?" gasped the astonished woman, nervelessly dropping the mop.

"Tell her that I have gone to Cheyenne for a doctor," called back Edith, not turning in the saddle.

"But you never can! It's nigh onto fifty miles, 'n' you don't know the way!" screamed

Digitized by Google

Mrs. Campbell in excited protest. "It won't be no manner of use noways, Miss Ellery. You can't get a doctor here in time to do anythin', even if there was anythin' to be done." But Edith was riding around the bend in the road as though she were deaf.

There was a stretch of a couple of miles where the road ran steadily uphill, sandy, rain-gullied, and bad all the way, and the girl grew calmer in the enforced slowness of the pace, finding an inexpressible relief in having a definite work laid out before her. As she neared the summit, however, she faced a harassing problem in respect to the way, as to which she had but a general idea to guide her. Once when they had been driving, Nelsine had happened to point out where the road forked, the one leading to Cheyenne. Beyond this Edith could be sure of nothing, while she knew but too well how easy it might be to go astray on that bewildering sea of plains. And to miss the way now, when so much depended upon her losing no time! She set her teeth sharply together, choking back a sob with the thought.

Religion had never taken more than conventional hold upon her. Although a decorous attendant at church services, with a keen appreciation of the beauty of the liturgy belonging to the creed in which she had been reared, her heart

Digitized by Google

had remained dormant. But there comes a time in every life when the soul must awake in instinctive clinging to the innate faith in a merciful, listening God, without which men might well go mad. In her heart-sinking despair, almost unconsciously the girl lifted her tear-wet eyes, praying as she had never prayed before in all the calm security of her happy life. Over and over again she murmured her one impassioned plea, finding strange comfort in the unthinking repetition. And in the exalted mood that gradually came upon her, the idea that flashed into her mind as she faced the dividing point in the roads seemed like a direct answer to her prayer.

The one to the right led to Cheyenne; but now she remembered that she could turn to the left and go directly to Hereford City, where she might telegraph for the physician, giving herself the advantage of a road she had travelled before, as well as accomplishing not a little saving in time. She almost laughed aloud in hysterical relief at the thought. "Only thirty miles to Hereford City! only thirty miles! Surely we can make that in time!" she exclaimed, in childish impulse to take the horse into the gratulatory confidence. As compared with the longer ride it seemed as nothing.

It was a day of dry, almost tropical heat. A

Digitized by Google

film of hot air quivered over the baking earth, and the cattle stood still, staring at nothing with eyes of dull appeal, hardly bending to the curling, colourless grasses that seemed turning to ashes beneath the sun's fierce fires. The flowers were almost gone, the girl listlessly noted; there were but the larkspur and mallow, the yellow flash of sunflower or belated cactus, with here and there straggling patches of primroses, the withering petals rosy red from the day's consuming kisses. She was conscious of a distinct effort in noting each smallest object by the way, in resolutely refusing to let her thoughts turn backward to question how it might be with him; and yet always Mrs. Campbell's words seemed ringing in her ears: "All creation can't do anything—but trust in the Lord!" And always, as in growing despair she urged the tired horse onward, her trembling lips murmured over and over the one pitiful plea—"O God! give me time! let me save him!"

Soon spent with fatigue, so little accustomed to hard riding that she began to suffer torture from that most senseless contrivance for real service, the modern sidesaddle, her eyes winking painfully with the white, hot glare, her face smarting with sunburn, the way grew maddeningly monotonous. Mile after mile appeared the same grass-grown, half obliterated line of

Digitized by Google

road, relentlessly unchanging. She had fancied that the landscape must appear somewhat familiar; that she could not fail to recognise the point where they had encountered the K 6 carriage; or that other place where had been the great herd of horses; or beyond, where Paul Brown had called her attention to an antelope bounding over the hill; but on and on she went, over one great earth billow after another, with never an object that she could certainly recall in connection with that other drive, which now began to seem like a dream of years gone by. Here and there wheel marks crossed the way at varying angles, leading whither she could not guess, while cattle trails showed everywhere. Sometimes the road seemed plainly dividing, and she would pause for an instant in agonized uncertainty, though always keeping on in a sort of blind despair to the direction in which she had first started, so far as she could guess it, although at last a conviction fastened upon her that she must have missed the way after all. But she was now reduced to a condition of dull apathy, too spent for tears or outcry. It began to seem as though some uncanny spell had been cast upon her, and she were doomed to endless companionship of the black blotch of shadow that seemed ever lying upon the ground beside her, gibing, mocking at her

Digitized by Google

misery, while neither moved at all. But she could not turn back—to him!—not until she had done all that she could; even though, lost in that vast world of emptiness, where even the cattle now seemed turned to stone, all that she could do might be to lay down her own helpless life. She owed him no less than unfaltering service, whatever the cost to herself. It would be a comfort—*afterward*, Nelsine had said! Ah, the torture of remembering the words now, in this pitiless chaos of earth and sky; to remember that it might with him be even now—the afterward! O God! O God! but hear her, and let her save him!

And as though her prayer in truth had been heard in heaven, it proved that she could not have kept more unswervingly to her way, nor have made better time upon her mission. It was but a little after one o'clock, when, exhausted to the utmost limit of her strength, she dismounted before the last gate at Cameron's ranch, her limbs so cramped and stiffened that she tottered rather than walked, leading her horse across the bridge and down the sandy slope to the house. The cook, a frying pan in hand, stood in the doorway, staring in open-mouthed wonder at the unexpected guest.

"Mr. Blythe—can I see him?" she asked, leaning heavily against the horse for support.

Digitized by Google

"Sure; he's just over at the barns. Come right in, ma'am—or," with a frightened glance over his shoulder at the disorder growing out of a dinner half cleared away, "just wait a minute, and I'll go call him."

The horse pulled impatiently, and Edith, comprehending his need, wearily followed his lead to a watering-trough by the windmill, where he fell to drinking greedily. Mr. Blythe was already approaching from the barns, his appearance for the once almost animated, his footsteps quickened by most lively curiosity.

Leaving the horse to drink his fill, the girl hurried forward to meet him, wasting no words in superfluous ceremony of greeting, as she briefly sketched the situation. "And can you send somebody right over to Hereford City to telegraph for a doctor?" she breathlessly demanded, her air a command. With reviving hope in having so far achieved her purpose, she was full of feverish anxiety to have all done. "I am too much used up to go myself," she added, her looks amply corroborating the statement. "It has been a long ride for me."

"An' Paul Brown bit with a rattlesnake! Je—rusalem!" the man dazedly ejaculated, evidently too nearly overwhelmed with surprise to fully grasp the statement. "Why, how the—er—that is, how on earth did that happen?"

Digitized by Google

Edith stamped her foot in sharp impatience. "If you would only send somebody at once, please, and let me explain afterward, Mr. Blythe. So much time has been lost already."

"Oh, sure; but I can telephone, you know," the man comfortably rejoined, in no wise hurrying himself. "We've connection with Mr. Cameron's office in Cheyenne, an' I'll call him right up. Lots quicker'n a wire from Hereford, you see," punctuating the remark with his wooden grin. "Here, you John, come an' take the lady's horse!—An' Miss Ellery, come in an' have a bite of sunthin'; you must be nigh about starved."

"You can telephone—oh, thank Heaven!" cried the girl, tears of nervous relief coursing down her cheeks, for which in the next breath she would shamefacedly apologize. "I am so done up, you see," she said to the man surveying her in a curious embarrassment of sympathy.

"Sure," he soothingly rejoined; "an' if you'd like a little nip o' sunthin' to kind of brace you up while the cook's rustlin' grub——"

"Oh, no; please go and telephone. Don't wait for anything." It seemed to the girl that with but another minute of delay she must go mad.

"All right, miss; just walk into the parlour an' make yourself easy," hastening to throw open

Digitized by Google

the door of the room she had occupied before. "An' don't you worry. We'll have the pill peddler on the road in the shake of a lamb's tail. 'Twon't be our fault if the Lord don't give poor Brown a show for his white alley yet."

Edith threw herself in an easy-chair with grateful sense of its luxury, remaining in almost comatose restfulness, until Mr. Blythe, announcing his coming by a bashful, preparatory cough, again appeared in the door.

"It's all right," he said cheerily. "Mr. Cameron was there hisself, an' he's out rustlin' a doctor this very minute."

"And how soon can he be here?" Edith eagerly demanded, her face illumined with new hope.

"Oh, within two hours, if his horse is worth a—er—that is, if his horse is any good at all. An' this is the nearest way to K 6 ranch by wagon road, so no time will be wasted. I'll have fresh horses ready to snake you through in no time, the minute his nibs shows up, so don't you worry, miss."

"Oh, thank you! thank you!" murmured the girl fervently.

"But what beats me is to think how such a feller as Brown ever come to get done up with a rattler," said Blythe, in a ruminative tone, a huge hand settling on the door jamb of either

Digitized by Google

side. "Why, I s'pose he's killed a thousand of 'em in his day; but the worm will turn, as the good Book says."

With a painful feeling of reluctance Edith gave a brief outline of the accident, her face, for all its sunburn, looking ever more wan and ill as she proceeded.

"Well, d—— er—dear me!" the man explosively ejaculated, turning to spit far out across the grass. "Poor Brown! he was a good fellow. Sure. A stem-winder, as you might say; always right there, up an' comin' when you wanted him, the best bronco breaker in Wyoming. An' to think that he'd play in such d—— er—that is, such bloomin' all-fired mean luck as that."

"But of course we shall get the doctor there in time now!" cried the girl in sharp expostulation, his use of the past tense sounding like a knell in her ears.

"U—m," pursing up his lips ambiguously. "If they've got plenty of whisky in the house, of course he's got a show; but if they ain't—well, it's pretty much like a bobtailed flush in a showdown: you ain't in it, so to speak. An' whisky is the meanest stuff to keep in the house; seems like it jest natchelly evaporates; jest when you come to want it, nine times out of ten you'll find you're out."

Digitized by Google

"But they had some whisky," protested the girl wretchedly.

"Some! They need a bar'l," he returned emphatically. "But don't you worry. Might jest as well keep hopin'; it's about as cheap as anything else. How comes it, though, that you had to come after the doctor? Where was all the men folks?"

"Following after horse thieves," she explained, sorry that it must be told, since it would involve further account of affairs. She was so deadly tired. "Two horses were stolen from the place last night—one of them Mr. Brown's Black Prince." She had thought Mr. Blythe disturbed by the news of his friend's mishap, but it was now apparent that this had been but a mere ripple on the surface.

"Gosh all hemlock!" he exclaimed, lost to any consideration of his words in the wild excitement that possessed him. "That horse of Brown's—why, that's a *horse*, ma'am! There ain't more'n two that'll come up to him in all Wyoming; no, nor in Colorado, neither. An' to think that I offered every trade under heaven for that horse not a month ago, an' Brown jest turnin' up his nose. Nothin' would tempt him; said he'd as soon sell his sweetheart, if he had one. An' now that horse stole, an' he laid on his back this way. Well, a man don't have to be

Digitized by Google

a Christian to wonder what the Lord is thinkin' about sometimes! But didn't Mr. Ellery send no word down? They're on the track of the rustlers, you think; but didn't he want one of the Stock Association men sent up, or sunthin'?"

"My brother did not know that I was coming. They had started to ride the first field before Mr. Brown was—hurt."

"But of course somebody'd better go up. Sure!" said Blythe eagerly. "That's what the Stock Association is for. 'N' there's Tregent loafin' round Cheyenne now, or was only yesterday; the very man for you. Send him out after a rustler—well, he gets there. Don't generally bring back much more'n a saddle, but you can bet your sweet life that it's jest the kind of a saddle that particular rustler used to straddle, 'n' that particular rustler is never heard of rustlin' any more in that part of the country. Tregent has a trick of kinder lettin' 'em get away from him, you see; he's kinder careless like sometimes." A twinkle in his eyes betrayed immense appreciation of the grim humour involved in the statement. "But, somehow, once they get away from him they never come back abotherin'—not as a general thing! I think I'd better call Mr. Cameron up again an' tell him to start Tregent along with the

Digitized by Google

doctor, an' to get a hustle on 'em. I believe I'll drive you back myself too, Miss Ellery; can jest as well as not. An' if anythin' happens to poor Brown—don't you be worried, ma'am; he's got a fightin' chance, of course; but if he *should* happen to get left in the shuffle—well, we're goin' to get that horse back jest the same, if there's hide or hair of him above ground in Wyoming. A horse like that!—I'll tell Mr. Cameron to get a move on the outfit jest as fast as he can. We ain't got any time to fool away *now*."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVI

THANKS to the use of the telephone and Blythe's urgency, the doctor and the representative of the Stock Growers' Association were enabled to hasten their progress by taking an opportune freight train to Hereford City, where a team met them, so that all were *en route* for K 6 ranch shortly after four o'clock, certain of reaching their goal in rather less than four hours, according to Mr. Blythe's cheerful prediction.

This gentleman, with something akin to exhilaration in his face, gave small heed to the handsome pair of thoroughbreds he incidentally managed in the intervals of talking horse with Mr. Tregent, who occupied the seat beside him. That person Edith regarded with a sort of dull curiosity. His peculiar method of disposing of the tasks intrusted to him had saved the county no less than thousands of dollars in court expenses, Mr. Blythe had admiringly declared. One would have hardly classified the man as dangerous, meeting him in a casual way, with his gentle, almost sleepy glance, and the

Digitized by Google

slow smile that accompanied his soft, drawling speech. It was not until Edith, on the back seat of the wagon, caught sight of the face in profile that she seemed to see behind the mask of amiability, catching the gleam of cunning in the small, half-closed eyes, and guessing what ugliness might lurk in the resolute, square-cut jaw.

The physician occupied the seat beside the girl, a trimly attired young man, whose sharp, hacking cough rendered too grewsome his laughing explanation that he had come West in an effort to defer funeral expenses until his estate should be in better shape to stand the strain. He was sufficiently young to find a pleasant spice of adventure in the expedition; while the demands of his practice—the climate of Wyoming bearing upon its medical fraternity with direct impetus toward starvation—was not of a sort to make the time involved of any moment. Indeed, in an undercurrent of reflection, the doctor found the pleasures of the trip not a little enhanced by contemplation of the mileage charge that might legitimately figure in his bill.

As much to refresh his memory as to make talk, Edith half suspected, the young man discoursed tirelessly of snake poison as they drove along, demanding with professional particular-

Digitized by Google

ity all details of the accident. "Permanganate of potash is the best thing," he complacently observed at length, with an air of understanding all mysteries and all knowledge that Edith began to find vaguely irritating. "There is no more certain remedy known to the profession to-day, in fact; but I suppose they would be hardly likely to have it on hand at this ranch."

"I am sure they have not," said the girl, with a sinking heart, the name to her suggesting nothing more likely than a roc's egg. "But of course you have it with you."

"Oh, certainly; but it should be applied within seven minutes to assure the best results."

"And it is now more than seven hours!" she gasped, in new despair. "But surely you do not mean to imply that it is too late to do —anything?"

"Ah, not at all," smiling with a professional nonchalance for which the girl began to fairly hate him. "We must do what we can, although, of course, it is rather late in the day."

"Have you had many cases of snake bite?" she asked, distrust now hand in hand with dislike.

"Never but one, I am happy to say. But do look at that little fellow there in the grass; a gopher, isn't it?"

"And did you save him—that one case?"

Digitized by Google

she sharply demanded, with no attention to spare for gophers.

"Oh, yes; thanks to heroic treatment. I was on hand in the nick of time, fortunately, and without stopping to parley, I simply amputated the toe that had been bitten, thereby preventing the poison from further permeating the system. After that it was comparatively a simple matter."

"Good gracious!" staring at him in utter horror. "You don't mean to imply that by any possible chance it can be necessary to amputate——"

"This man's leg?—by no means. It is too late for any such procedure as that. The treatment must be determined by conditions when we get there. The chances are, if he pulls through till then——"

"Oh, don't!" she sharply interrupted. "Why need you——"

"But I had not the slightest intention of prophesying evil," he rejoined, with his complacent grin. "There is every reason to suppose that he will hold out till we get there, of course. But, by the way, I don't think I quite understood what the young man's relation is; he is not a member of your family?"

"No, he is only—the horse trainer," her face flushing with an embarrassment for which she

Digitized by Google

unreasonably hated her interlocutor. "It happened that I saw the accident," she added in resentful explanation; "and—there was nobody else to come for you."

"Well, you must not be nervous now," he urged vaguely. "It can do no good, you know."

"That is the worst of it," she impatiently retorted, almost turning her back upon him. "Nothing promises to do any good, so far as I can see."

The dreariness of the way soon told upon the spirits of all the party, reducing them to a condition of enduring apathy. Blythe listlessly devoted his attention to the horde of hungry flies hovering over the horses' shining flanks, deftly dislodging one after the other with his long whip, while the lamblike dare-devil at his side meditatively worked his heavy jaws on a quid of tobacco, from which, with unerring aim, he regularly spat upon any flower that stood prominently above its fellows on his side of the way. The doctor seemed to grow ever more boyish in his look of pallor and dejection as they went on, his cough seeming more frequent and more exhausting, until Edith, inexpressibly worn herself, found her impulsive dislike of the man crumbling away in pity for the physician who might not heal himself.

Digitized by Google

"To which school of medicine do you belong?" she inquired at length, when they had ridden for miles in a silence almost unbroken.

"To which school——" he vaguely repeated, looking as though he had been half asleep.

"I mean, are you a homeopath, or do you practice according to the old school?" she rather confusedly explained, aware that whichever creed he affected, he was quite capable of resenting the implication that he could by any possibility hold to the other. "I suppose it is fair to assume that you are not a Christian Scientist," smiling nervously. Now that the question had occurred to her, she was really consumed with anxiety for the answer. Like most persons pinning faith to the principle of *Similia similibus curantur*, she was a bigot in her conviction that there was really no other way by which ailing humanity might be saved.

"Which school——" he repeated again, his face lighting as only a man's may who sees before him opportunity to mount a hobby. "That question, Miss Ellery, if you will pardon my saying so, betrays the voice of the layman. The dividing lines to which you allude are practically obsolete to-day. A few musty old practitioners may cling to them in theory, but to the new school, with enlarged scope and broadened perceptions, they count for nothing in

Digitized by Google

everyday practice. Since the death of old Dr. Bayard, I don't believe there is a man in the country practicing as an exclusively homeopathic physician. The colleges still teach it, to be sure, because they are afraid to recant what they once professed; but in actual fact, the school as it was once known is as extinct as the Dodo."

"But most reputable physicians profess to belong to one school or the other," protested the girl, her spirits sinking the lower with every word. If, after all her pains, she had but brought a narrow-minded zealot of the old school, bound to an Ixion wheel of his own conceit—the idea was tragic! "I have certainly met a number calling themselves homeopathic physicians at a quite recent date."

"Calling themselves so—certainly," he rejoined, with an air of having scored a point. "But the assumption is groundless, I assure you. The physician who is abreast of the times to-day says with Molière: '*Je prends mon bien ou je le trouve*,' whatever the creed of the college which happened to give his diploma. Every old-school practitioner has adopted more or less that which was formerly regarded as homeopathic treatment; while no so-called homeopathic physician awake to his calling but resorts to allopathic remedies and allopathic doses upon occa-

Digitized by Google

sion. Such drugs as antipyrine in fifteen-grain doses, of salicylate of soda in twenty-grain doses, of sulphonal in ten-grain doses, morphine in anodyne quantity, as well as compound prescriptions, are all everyday matters, where once they would have been impossible. We are ready to prescribe for a patient according to any theory that has been proved good. The name homeopathy still exists because it once stood for the theory and was essentially distinctive; but in these times——"

He was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing, and perforce left the sentence unfinished, to Edith's intense relief. To her jaded mind the flood of words had come to seem not unlike the dropping of water on the head of a martyr of old.

On and on they went along the dreary way that seemed endless, Mr. Blythe interspersing variety, upon the advice of Tregent, who seemed familiar with every inch of the country, by occasional short cuts from one point to another, in nonchalant disregard of such passing matters as cactus clumps and prairie-dog holes, although with every new jolt smothered ejaculations broke from the driver's lips, like bubbles coming to the surface from a seething caldron of pent-up profanity. But Edith's growing fear that they might after all go astray finally found relief as they

Digitized by Google

emerged upon the road leading to Campbell's, down which the wagon pitched precariously in the fast-gathering shadows.

It seemed as an omen of evil that the ranch house was in darkness, while no sign of life was roused by their passing. She had thought that Mrs. Campbell, hearing the passing of the team, might come to the door to be assured of the success of her mission, at the same time calling out the tidings the girl so longed, yet dreaded, to hear.

"They go on the 'early to bed and early to rise' principle, these ranch folks," the doctor idly observed, surveying the darkened windows.

"They work hard; they need rest," she apathetically returned.

"I fancy you will rest well to-night, Miss Ellery," he went on, regarding her drooping figure with kindly commiseration. "You are very tired."

"Yes, I am tired," she listlessly assented, her lips quivering with sardonic impulse to smile. There was one who might rest well this night—too well; but if so, what for herself? She had ceased to pray. As she neared the goal she realized that she had almost ceased to hope; only waiting in lethargic endurance for what answer might develop to the prayers already uttered.

Against the dark grayness of the sky ahead,

Digitized by Google

hard and black lay the rugged outline of the hill down which he had ridden at such breakneck speed on the day when he had come to meet her, frightened for her safety. Once more her staring eyes seemed to see him, the handsome face aglow with ruddy life, as he sprang from his horse beside her—catching her breath sharply at the memory of a certain something that now she knew she had read in his gray eyes even then. As on that other evening, over the creek gray wisps of fog were hovering, reaching out to clasp the intruders in chill embrace. She shudderingly remembered that she had likened them before to a gathering of escaping souls. And had one more been added to the number now? Had he once more to meet her?

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVII

It was not yet nine o'clock when the team rattled across the little bridge at Big Cow Creek, and Nelsine, like a wraith in her white gown, came flying across the lawn to meet them.

"Edith, is it really you?" she breathlessly exclaimed, as she came up to the wagon. "Oh, you dear, dreadful girl! What a fright you have given us! How could you do such a crazy thing? I have been perfectly frantic all day. I was sure you would be lost. I could never have dreamed of the possibility of your flying off that way until Mrs. Campbell came and told me, and then—I almost died. How could you be so thoughtless as not to remember how I would feel?—it is a wonder I am not in my grave! I have just walked the floor and wrung my hands all day. To think of a girl like you wandering about all over those hideous plains, where even I, who have been over the road a hundred times, would never have dared venture alone. Oh, I ought to shake you, you crazy creature!" She had the girl in her arms now, laughing and crying together in a joyous frenzy that filled Edith

Digitized by Google

with dull surprise. She had not guessed that she held such a place in Nelsine's heart. "Hugh came back not half an hour ago, as frantic as I when he heard what you had been doing. He wanted to start right off after you; you would have met him had you been five minutes later. But I insisted that he should have something to eat first—he has been in the saddle all day, you know. And who could say when or where he might find you? Oh, it is such a relief to have you here, safe and sound, after all."

Edith stood still, dully unresponsive, staring at the bunk house, where through the open door a light was faintly glowing. "I have brought the doctor—it is not too late?" she said, a little catch in her voice.

"And this is he, I suppose," cried Nelsine, hospitably extending her pretty hand, with a smile that made the man her slave from that hour. She was gregarious to her finger tips, this lady of K 6 ranch, and in her hunger for society of some sort it might be questioned if she would not have beamed with that same ravishing smile had she been called to welcome the devil himself, hoofs, horns, and all; but this, happily, the charmed man now gratefully pressing the small, soft hand, could not know. "Doctor—?" she interrogatively added, turning to Edith for the introduction that should come; but that

Digitized by Google

young woman was standing apart from the group, having so far falteringly advanced toward the dimly lighted doorway.

"My name is Wright, Mrs. Ellery," the doctor said for himself, with a glance of such frank admiration as he had not dreamed of bestowing on the younger lady.

Hugh Ellery at this moment joined them, seizing at once upon his sister.

"Well, reversibly speaking, you're a nice girl!" he exclaimed, his hands resting caressingly on her shoulders, when he had given her a fierce little shake. "You would certainly take the prize for bats in the belfry!—flying off on a wild-goose chase across a country where even the geese need a compass to keep to the course. Do you realize that you have spoiled the best appetite I ever had in my life, and frightened me out of a year's growth to boot? And now, after all this, you have the audacity to make it clear that all my emotion has been but wasted; that you have been simply taking a little constitutional, as it were. You villain! what have you to say for yourself?"

"Oh, her actions speak louder than words. She has brought the doctor to counteract all ill effects—that is, if it is a really, true-as-you-live doctor," laughed Mrs. Ellery, taking the girl's cold hand in caressing clasp. "I must confess

Digitized by Google

that it is by no means clear to my mind how, without the aid of magic, all these people could be brought here so soon." She had already greeted the others, whose hands Hugh was now cordially shaking. "I will restrain my curiosity, however, until you have had some supper," she hospitably added. "You must all be starving."

"But how is my patient?" asked the doctor, reminded that he ought to be somewhat surprised at this unprofessional reception.

Edith drew her breath sharply, turning once more toward that open door behind which an ominous silence seemed to reign. She knew Nelsine too well to imagine that even death, provided her own heart's dearest were left untouched, could much affect her gay, volatile spirits. Possessed of a sound digestion, and not too much feeling, Nelsine would always be comfortably philosophical in regard to ills not legitimately her own. "He is—dead!" the girl gasped, voicing at last the conviction that had fastened itself upon her from the moment of their arrival.

"He may be dead—drunk, if I may be pardoned the word," laughed Hugh amusedly. "I think little of the venom could have actually entered the foot; naturally the stocking absorbed some of it; while, happily for Brown, it develops that we have a heroine on the place, and——"

Digitized by Google

"Artalissa!—only fancy!" interrupted Nelsine, who dearly loved to tell exciting news herself; "she deliberately put her lips to the bite and sucked out the poison. Was it not heroic—and disgusting?"

"But nothing could have been more sensible," put in the doctor in gently patronizing tone. "She ran no risk. The poison of serpents is innocuous in the mouth, unless there should happen to be some cut or abrasion. I dare say the presence of mind of this person saved the man's life."

"Together with the whisky they have been pouring down his throat all day," laughed Ellery. "Would you like to take a look at him before supper, doctor? I dare say there is nothing you need do now, but it will not detain you a moment."

"Oh, let's go 'n' shake with him anyhow, poor old cuss!" said Blythe, leading the way. "But how about the horse?—get any track of him?"

"And so it was Artalissa who saved his life," exclaimed Edith, with a queer, staccato burst of laughter, as she followed Nelsine into the house.

"It was horrible!—it fairly made me sick," declared Nelsine with a shudder; "but then"—tentatively—"it was grand in its way. I should hardly have thought her capable of it."

Digitized by Google

"There are times when we are capable of anything," Edith moodily muttered, sinking into the nearest chair. "Oh, how tired I am! I am simply dead!"

"You poor, dear thing!" tenderly removing her hat. "To think of your wearing yourself out like this, merely for one of the men. But it is just like your impulsive unselfishness: self-preservation has nothing to do with the laws of your nature. You would let yourself be burned at the stake without a murmur, if it seemed to you your duty. You are the most generous, self-sacrificing——"

"Oh, don't!" murmured Edith in a voice of misery, covering her face with her hands. "I am a fool—an utter fool, and I only wish the fool-killer would appear at the door this minute."

"You are an angel—only human enough to be half starved and all worn out. Sit right there, dearie, and don't move until I bring you a cup of tea." She bustled back after a moment, pushing a small table beside the easy-chair.

"I don't want anything—I can't eat," the girl listlessly protested, but Nelsine only laughed, hurrying away for the dainty little supper which she presently brought on a tray. "Indeed, I am not hungry. You must not expect me to eat all that, after the lunch they gave me at Cameron's.

Digitized by Google

They opened all the canned things they had on the place, I think, when I couldn't eat a thing."

"Then don't dare to offer that as an excuse for not eating now, you unreasonable woman! Do take a little tea at least, dear," holding out the cup in tender coaxing. "Of course you are half dead—who wouldn't be, after riding sixty miles, with all the fright and worry of the morning besides? Poor girlie!"

"And to think that I might have spared myself all the worry and all the wild-goose chase; to think that, while I was flying across the country proving what depth of foolishness was in me, Artalissa was quietly saving the man's life by the simple magic of common sense! When I think how wild I was—and all for nothing—ah, it is such a joke, Nelsine, isn't it? Did you ever hear of anything funnier?" laughing in hysterical merriment until tears were pouring down her cheeks. "Oh, why don't you laugh, Nelsine—it is so rich!"

"Poor girlie! it may become a serious joke if you don't eat. Do take the tea, dear, and try and be calm. You will make yourself ill."

"Oh, no; I have been ailing, but now I am rapidly recovering. Your news was an antidote. And give me another dose; I want the details. What did he say when she saved his life in such unique fashion? Did he fall at

Digitized by Google

her feet and cry, 'My preserver—my preserver!'? What is the proper thing to say when one's life is saved? So far as I remember, I said nothing at all."

"And, so far as I know, the horse trainer said no more," rejoined Nelsine dryly, yet hoping to divert the girl's mind from hysterical drift. "To tell the truth, whether it was booziness or embarrassment, whatever the cause, I thought the fellow behaved rather shabbily. But men take everything for granted when women are in love with them. I suppose he will be graciously pleased to reward her by allowing her to lay down the rest of her life for him; and I shall have the small satisfaction of saying 'I told you so!' while I am looking up another girl."

"But what could be more proper? It is only a pity that I could not have known, so that I might have brought back a minister instead of the doctor. Then my trip need not have been wholly wasted," she cried, with another outbreak of that wild, unnatural laughter. "Perhaps they will allow me to send one back from Cheyenne when I go down to-morrow."

"To-morrow! What can you mean?" exclaimed Nelsine, with a startled stare, for the moment convinced that the girl had taken leave of her senses.

Digitized by Google

"I told Mr. Blythe that I should go back with him. Oh, don't you see?" raising her hands in peevish attempt to silence the storm of opposition ready to issue from the other's lips. "I can not stay here after this, to pose with Artalissa either as a heroine or a fool—it is impossible! I could not endure it for a day —you must not ask me. And then, there are other reasons—hundreds of them—that I remembered as we drove along. And I told Mr. Blythe that he should have me as a passenger."

"But this is preposterous!" cried Nelsine, staring at her in bewildered vexation. "How can you be so morbid—so unreasonable? Carried away by a noble impulse to save the man who had just saved your life, perhaps——"

"Perhaps!"

"In a perfectly natural impulse to make what return you could, you rushed off upon an undertaking full of reckless daring, just as grand as though it had not been all superfluous, as things turned out. And if there is any reason in this why you should now run away——"

"But I was going in a few days anyway—remember that, Nelsine. This will save you and Hugh the long drive to Hereford City. You know you always hate it; while with all this trouble about the horses, I am sure Hugh will regard the opportunity as fairly providential.

Digitized by Google

A few days more or less would hardly count against such a saving of time to you two dears, particularly as I shall probably visit you later. And considering the importance of my engagement in Denver," a satirical smile drawing down the corners of her mouth, " surely, Nelsine, you should wish me Godspeed! "

" Perhaps you are right; at least we will see what Hugh says," exclaimed Nelsine woefully, wringing her soft hands; " but with so much happening all at once—oh, dear! oh, dear! what will come next? "

" Oh, it isn't a serial story—to be continued in our next," laughed Edith, rather crazily, as she gathered up her hat and gloves, moving toward her room. " It will be like the core of the little boy's apple, Nelsine; there won't be any next."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. HALLET, widow of the late Richard Hallet, lawyer and politician, possessed one of the most beautiful homes in that most beautiful of residence quarters, the Capitol Hill of Denver; but it had come to be remarked by her friends that she was rarely to be found there save for brief intervals, when journeyings elsewhere had so clogged her footsteps with accumulations of bric-à-brac that she was fairly driven back to the home dumping ground to disembarrass herself. Certain it was, that since the death of her husband, some three years before, the fair mistress of the mansion, as often as she returned, seemed only to be seized with new mania for wandering.

There were those to remark that Barbara Hallet's evident lack of love for her home might be due to the fact that for her the place was full of memories she would fain escape. It was an open secret that her married life had been unhappy; but of whatever sins of omission or commission Dick Hallet had been guilty, he had made what atonement he might by dying,

Digitized by Google

while now everybody was agreed that the lady must be unreasonable indeed if she imagined any cause for complaint in a lot so fair. She was in the early thirties, with a sweetness of expression that charmed most persons into pronouncing her irregular features lovely, while her tact and graciousness of manner completed the conquest of friends on every side; and not only that, but kept them always admiring, always loyal, whatever her caprices. She had wealth sufficient to gratify every reasonable desire, while a beautiful boy, now four years old, gave breadth and purpose to her life.

"But we were perishing with *ennui*, baby and I," she gaily declared, when she was making Edith Ellery welcome in her prettiest guest chamber, one whose western windows looked across a sea of the city's roofs, ruffled with waves of swaying tree tops, on to that jagged and scalloped line of shadowy pinks and grays and purples flecked with eternal snows, the backbone of the continent—to Mrs. Hallet, as to most Denverites, one of the grandest views which earth has to offer. "If there is any place duller than Denver in July, it must be Denver in August. So far as appearances go, the city has its best foot forward in summer, but socially we are simply dead."

"Ah, the luxury of being dead for a little

Digitized by Google

while!" exclaimed the girl, with something in her laugh that called a keen flash of questioning into the blue eyes that were endowed with the gift of seeing most where they assumed to notice least. "You could promise me nothing more delightful."

She could not have come to a better place to recover from the mental and physical strain to which she had been subjected. Barbara Hallet was that rare type of woman who could entertain, without over-entertaining, her guests. Full of gracious thoughtfulness for the stranger within her gates, she was yet too well equipped with tact and womanly intuition to make her offices obtrusive or burdensome; and Edith Ellery found herself in a restful calm for which she was grateful, although too wearily preoccupied to give her friend full credit for the kindly self-effacement, the exquisite unselfishness, which, while seeming to leave her always to her own devices, was yet ever showering her with attentions that fell upon the girl's troubled spirit as the breath of heaven. So fast events had tripped on one another's heels, that now, in surpassing weariness, mental no less than physical, the events of the last few days had but assumed the blurred outlines of a troubled dream. It was as though she had awakened in a new world, to woo forgetfulness in a languorous

Digitized by Google

repose where no note of discord could ever sound.

Although they had known each other but a short time, a warm affection had grown up between her hostess and herself. Nelsine and Barbara had been friends since boarding-school days together, and thus it had happened a few months before, when Mrs. Hallet, returning from a winter in Egypt with her boy, had loitered in New York for a few weeks, Edith, likewise opportunely visiting in the city, had received peremptory command from the Wyoming ranch that she go forthwith to call upon Nelsine's dearest friend from Denver. From a matter of duty the meeting had developed a delight. Edith had fallen in love with charming Barbara at first sight, the affection but deepening when later the new friend was induced to visit at the Ellery home in Boston, the conditions of everyday life revealing her rarely lovable, if many-sided, character.

Barbara Hallet, on her side, had returned in full measure the girl's impulsive affection, but withal, there had not been time in their brief acquaintance for anything like real intimacy. Their lives had but touched on the surface. With the coming of her guest she was quick to perceive the subtle change that had been wrought in the month of separation, but

Digitized by Google

she could not ask the cause. She could only wait and watch, her love developing a desire, far removed from mere vulgar curiosity, to understand, and to help if she might.

"You must have brought back the breath of the lotus flowers in some of these old vases," Edith smilingly declared, on the third day after her coming, her eyes luxuriously wandering over the rich souvenirs of travel furnishing the room that Mrs. Hallet called her bit of Egypt. The warm July sunshine stole its way through draperies of bright-hued silks, tenderly touching the heavy, dark-dyed rugs whose bloom had been wrought by the sunbeams of centuries, bringing back a soft glow of youth to the faded threads heavily embroidering the antique portières. Palms, brave and young, curved their lithe plumes from vases of bronze grown old in a land of palms; while over the couch where the girl was resting hung a quaintly fashioned lamp filched from some holy place, its lace-work of silver-incrusted bronze all blackened as though from breath of centuries of sinful confession that had filtered to heaven through its meshes. "I feel as though I might even have caught a reminiscent taste of the fruit, so indisposed do I feel to leave this blessed couch. And to be the happy possessor of all this harmony of colour, this wealth of metal and woods marvellous in

Digitized by Google

carving and inlaid work, all this glory of silks and embroideries! Ah, you lucky woman, I wonder if you half realize your good fortune—with every wish of your heart gratified!"

"Oh, you don't know," the hostess lightly returned; "the heart is an unruly member sometimes."

"Yes," the girl assented, turning away her face with a flickering something in its expression that the majority of persons would never have noticed. But Barbara Hallet missed little that came within the range of her carelessly veiled vision.

"You have not caught the rattle of the bones yet," she idly added. "You don't know what skeletons are hidden in the closets."

"From this outlook I could believe in mummies, but never in anything so commonplace as mere bones," the girl declared, with the listless laugh that seemed now her nearest approach to gaiety—she who but the other day had been overflowing with girlish fun.

"I almost feel like a mummy myself sometimes, when we are all alone, baby Paul and I, in the sepulchral emptiness of this great house," Mrs. Hallet declared with a shrug. "I feel myself stiffening and hardening and withering, until I just have to pack up and run away."

"I suppose it is lonely. You miss your—

Digitized by Google

husband," Edith unthinkingly returned, her face crimsoning on the instant with consciousness that she had probably said the most tactless thing possible. She had heard from Nelsine the whole sad story of her friend's married life, knowing full well that the most conscientious wife could hardly have known any lasting sorrow for a husband so unconscionable.

But Mrs. Hallet, apparently, was in no smallest degree perturbed. She reached over to break a sprig of heliotrope from a vase on the table beside her, absently smelling the flower. "I'm afraid I don't, dear—that is the worst of it," she deliberately answered, after a moment. "Shocking, is it not? It is the skeleton upon which, for very decency's sake, I should keep the closet door forever tightly closed. But it is one of the luxuries of having friends that we may venture to thrust even the ugliest of our secrets upon them occasionally; and surely you and I need have no concealments from each other, dear." Edith could have hardly guessed that beneath that gentle, deprecating little smile lurked a fixed purpose to probe her own small secret to its core. Mrs. Hallet was silent a moment, thoughtfully considering the girl's pale face. No; she need not grudge the price of confidence for confidence. Edith was one who would be unswervingly

Digitized by Google

loyal to any trust. "Why should I trouble to fib about it to you?" she went on, with a dreary little smile. "All the world knows what my matrimonial experiment was. I tried to be sorry when it ended—I *was* sorry for poor Dick; but for myself, I never dared analyze my feelings too closely, lest I should hate myself beyond endurance. You can not know, child, what a loveless marriage means. I hope you never may."

"Did you suffer so much?" asked the girl, with almost a frightened look in her eyes, as she sat up, restlessly awaiting the answer. "Was it so bad?".

"It was daily and hourly crucifixion," was the reply, in a tone of tense vehemence. "But don't pity me; I don't deserve it," she added, answering the look on the girl's face. "Poor Dick might have been a good husband to some woman —he might have been a good man, if I had not married him. I did not love him, but in my blindness and ignorance I did not realize the wrong in marrying him under such circumstances. I liked him, and it seemed to me enough. I did not think what it meant for him; I thought only of myself; and for the selfish caprice of girlish egotism his life was wrecked. Could I complain if my own happiness went down at the same time? It served me right."

Digitized by Google

"But if you really liked him and did your duty——" protested the girl, with a troubled face.

"Oh, duty!—the smug, self-satisfied *dewty* of the New England conscience!—I believe I hate the word!" cried the other sharply. "Of course I began by doing my duty—and nothing else. It had never happened to occur to me that to hold up a cheek for the conventional kiss when a husband came in or went out of the house, to see that his stockings were always darned and his dinners properly served, did not cover the whole ground of wifely devotion. I did not love him; and so what did it profit him however I tried to do my duty otherwise? It was to offer a stone when his heart was crying for bread."

Edith, nervously clasping and unclasping her hands, eagerly studied the clouded, downcast face, eloquent of reminiscent pain. "And you did not learn to love him?" she murmured, after a moment.

"Never. I think I never really tried. I had quarrelled with the one I did care for, and, like the old lady who enjoyed bad health, I believe I found a romantic satisfaction in nursing a sickly sentiment for the old love. Perhaps I could not help it. The heart is a queer thing. But I was touched by Dick's devotion, and married him in a blind hope that he might make me happy—

Digitized by Google

perhaps most of all to be avenged on the other fellow, to show him that I did not care. I had a hazy idea that once I was married all must go well; that the wedding ring held some occult power to wipe out all that I did not wish to remember, a talisman to open a new world in which happiness must be a matter of course."

"And you could not forget?" The girl had sunk down on a pile of pillows at the other's feet, and she did not look up as her lips faltered the question.

"Do women ever forget?—or wish to?"

"But if you had wished it?—if you had deliberately set yourself the task of trampling the feeling under foot?"

"I wish I had, dear; and I wish I could have succeeded. But if I had—to be off with the old love is not always to be on with the new. And the marriage relation, with its disillusionizing everyday association, is hardly calculated to nourish romance unless it is already well rooted in fondest affection. If you are ever tempted to try such an experiment, dearie, my advice to you is, Don't."

"But don't you believe there is such a thing as a rational friendship between a husband and wife, giving happiness, even though sentiment may be left out of the bargain?"

"If there is such a thing I never happened to

Digitized by Google

encounter it," declared Mrs. Hallet decidedly, her blue eyes rather amusedly studying the girl's flushed face. But her tone was very earnest as she continued, " No woman's heart could ever be really satisfied with such a paltry makeshift; while, whatever the quality of his love, no man but demands full measure of passion in his wife, and feels defrauded of his right if it is denied him. And why should he not?—it is his right. Why should a woman presume to accept all that a man may give her of material things—his name, and all the honours it may bestow, to say nothing of the love that chose her from all the world—and imagine that she makes him fair return when she but sits at the head of his table, even bearing him children, but at the same time giving him only the barren courtesies of a rational friendship? Why, child, the idea is monstrous, if you will but consider it from all sides. Think of the injustice, the cruel wrong to him. The fact that she has married him must cut him off from legitimate seeking at other hands the love that she denies, the love that all human nature demands. The world says that he must look to her only for his happiness. And what right has she, because in her short-sighted foolishness she may think a rational friendship sufficient for her, to fetter him, make it a crime for him to reach out for that satisfying love for which his man's nature must

Digitized by Google

one day instinctively hunger? Ah, whatever you do, dear heart, never be guilty of such a crime as that."

"But if it is not one's nature to feel great passion," murmured the girl, almost entreatingly. "Nelsine says she does not believe it is in me to make a goose of myself that way."

"Then you would better not presume to get married," returned her mentor, with a dry little laugh. "A married old maid is a hopeless case."

Edith absently reached for a fan, with which she toyed for a few minutes before speaking. "And what became of him—the old love?" she hesitantly asked at length; "that is, if you don't mind telling me."

"Oh, no; though there is little to tell. He was married, and lived happily ever after."

"And do you suppose that he too—remembers?"

"By no means. Themistocles was the only one of his sex, you know, who ever prayed for forgetfulness without having it granted him. Indeed, the majority don't have to pray for the boon; it is always theirs."

"But you—have cared all these years!" the girl's face wore again that frightened look. "It lasts like that!"

"Nothing lasts, dear; youth's romances least of all; only sometimes they die hard, and their

Digitized by Google

ghosts linger behind them. They are only ghosts, thinnest of thin air. We grow used to them as time goes on; we get them well in hand, so that they can always be hustled back into the closet when they grow too obstreperous; only—oh, well, dearie, don't feel that you are called to waste sympathy on me. Here is my sweetheart now," as little Paul came into the room, a fat pug squirming in his arms. "Here is the heart that will never fail me," stooping to press a kiss on the child's rose-leaf cheek.

There was a silence of many moments between the two women. Paul had settled himself with the dog on the bearskin at his mother's feet, filling the pause with a merry monologue. "Cough, Tommy, cough!" he would cry, peremptorily patting the pudgy, wrinkled back; and the small lump of solemnity would obediently give vent to a lazy growl that seemed curiously to appeal to the child's sense of humour. With each response to his demand he would break into a gay gurgle of baby laughter, finally throwing himself upon the floor in infectious abandon. Both women laughed in sympathy, and the confidential spell was broken.

But an hour later, when by chance Mrs. Hallet came upon her guest, half hidden behind a screen in the drawing-room, traces of recent tears very evident in the flushed, unhappy face, she

Digitized by Google

impulsively clasped the girl in her arms. "What is it, dearie?" she murmured between persuasive kisses. "Here I have been selfishly prattling of my own dead-and-gone woes, when you should have been the one to confess these troubles of your own. But now you owe me the confidence; it is only a fair exchange, you know; and surely you can trust me, dear."

"Why should you imagine there is anything to tell?" protested the girl, in futile effort to assume an air of unconsciousness; then all her hardihood deserting her, she cried helplessly: "But why should I deny it? Of course there is something; only it would seem to you such a ridiculously small matter. You would laugh if I were to tell it."

"Ah, you don't know how much self-control I have," admonished the other, with a tender smile. "Try me and see."

"And then, you have helped me already, all unwittingly. Your words have been as apples of gold."

"But what have I said that was so directly inspired?" looking puzzled.

"You said, if I were tempted to try a certain experiment—don't!" the words venturing forth with a hysterical burst of laughter. "You see, somebody had asked me to marry him."

Digitized by Google

"Somebody for whom you do not care?"

"Somebody for whom I care very much in a way, but I fear it is not the right way. I like him—respect him—but——"

"It is not love!" Mrs. Hallet bent down to tenderly kiss the flushed face before she added in gently remonstrant tone, "But I don't like to be overwhelmed with such a sense of responsibility. I suppose I may guess who it is. I met him at your house, did I not?"

"Yes."

"He is a thoroughly good fellow, Edith; at least he seemed so to me."

"Oh, he is; he is lovely; and I thought perhaps—well, I took two months to consider my answer, which I am afraid I gave him reason to think might be '*Yes.*' O Barbara! how could I, do you think? I must have been just a little bit crazy."

"Are you sure that you are perfectly sane now?" laughed the other uncertainly. "You might do worse than say 'Yes' to such a man. You must not be hasty."

"Oh, I know it—I know it! But does it seem to you undue haste when one has had a month to think?—when one has hardly thought of anything else night or day in all that time? I think he may rather be disposed to complain that I have been so slow."

Digitized by Google

"You are sure that you do not—can not care for him?"

"Absolutely sure—now. Indeed, I have known it for weeks, only—I would not admit it even to myself." There was something in the tone at which the other started, a light of comprehension in her eyes.

"I see," she murmured tenderly in the small, pink ear; "there is somebody else."

"Why should you say so? Why should you think it?" cried the girl vehemently; then, as she met the glance of those soft blue eyes, that seemed probing her very soul, with a pitiful, inarticulate cry, she buried her burning face in the other's neck.

"Forgive me, darling; I understand," whispered that most discreet of women, triumph blending with the loving kindness of her smile, as she bent to kiss the fraction of white neck between collar and disordered hair. "And now you shall not be tormented any more; but some day you will tell me all about it."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XIX

THE tall old clock in the corner of the hall was ringing its knell for another dead hour in five slow, clanging strokes, when Edith Ellery, dressed for a drive, came gingerly tripping down the great oak staircase whose exquisite polish was of a sort to almost audibly cry a warning to unwary feet. Never could the girl have looked more lovely than now, as she settled herself in a corner of the high-backed seat in the shadow of the stairway, her cheeks seeming as though they burned to rival the smiling, red-lipped mouth, her brown eyes alight with a sort of scintillant glow, till they were like bits of polished gold-stone. In natural reaction from the gloom that had been so heavily upon her of late, she was for the moment almost riotously happy. She had forgotten to reproach herself for her weak and vacillating attitude toward Marshall Woodbury; she no longer considered his possible pain; she did not ask what the future might hold in store; she only exulted in the thought that within the hour, when once her fateful telegram was flashing over the wires, she could feel that the fool-

Digitized by Google

ish tangle into which she had blundered was severed to its last thread. She could have shouted aloud in the mad sense of freedom that was hers once more.

A paper was lying on the table at one side, which she idly picked up, too preoccupied, however, to give any thought to reading it. The striking of the clock had suddenly reminded her of the difference in time between Denver and Boston, with the fast following reflection that before her message could be on its way Marshall Woodbury would probably have left his office for the night. She questioned if it would be better to have it follow him to his house. Would it spoil his good night's sleep? —fidgeting uneasily as she once more found herself confronting the vexed question as to just how much this man really cared for her. In truth, it had been a certain jealous distrust of the depths of his passion that had held her back in the first place, when she had been most disposed in his favour—a haunting conviction that there had been almost too much of cool reason in his choice; and there was a touch of whimsical irony in her smile as she decided that the telegram should follow him to his pillow. Satisfaction of a sort lurked in the belief that she was not, after all, to hurt him overmuch; although her woman's heart was still capable of

Digitized by Google

an unreasoning soreness that, since he had presumed to call himself her lover, he had not loved her more.

The small, unacknowledged pique contributed somewhat of almost vengeful zest to her feeling as she said over to herself the words she planned to send, checking off the numbers on her fingers. Like many persons whose life paths have been apart from business ways, she had a vague conviction that to transmit more than ten words by telegraph was somehow forbidden by law, while to send less seemed an impossible affront to that passion for getting the worth of her money innate in every woman's heart. But to clearly convey her meaning in such meagre phrase, and in such words that its full purport should not be apparent to every callow operator who heard the clicking of the words between that point and Boston—all this was a matter calling for anxious consideration.

"Cannot see you here. Painful and useless. Will write." It seemed sufficient, but one more word might go within the prescribed limit—regarding with a puzzled frown the little finger that was holding itself stiffly apart from its fellows, as though bound to call attention to the fact that it had been left out in the brief scale. And might it not be possible to find other words, equally obscure to the uninformed out-

Digitized by Google

sider, yet more luminously full of meaning for him? Idly debating the question, her fingers fell into an absent-minded thrumming upon the paper in her lap, until of a sudden she leaned forward breathlessly, a strange light in her eyes. She was dizzily staring at some flaring headlines, at which the rigid fingers of one hand mechanically pointed.

"DISCOVERY OF AN ORGANIZED BAND OF HORSE THIEVES IN WYOMING.

STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS.

ARREST OF PAUL BROWN, RINGLEADER OF THE GANG.

THE MAN HITHERTO HELD IN HIGH ESTEEM AMONG THE CATTLE MEN.

FEARS THAT HE MAY BE LYNCHED."

So far she read almost without comprehension, dully going over the lines a second time before she could seem to grasp the import of the words; then, with a smothered cry, she caught the sheet closer to her blanched face, wildly devouring the finer print which followed:

"CHEYENNE, WYO., *July 8, 18*—.—For some time past the cattle men of this section have suffered severely from the depredations of rustlers, who seemed to be working in a regularly organized band, covering different parts of the State, passing the stock from hand to hand,

Digitized by Google

altering brands, and so cleverly hiding their tracks that detection seemed well-nigh impossible. Numberless attempts at unearthing the gang have been made, all proving futile until now, when it is believed that the ringleader is safely lodged in the custody of the sheriff at Cheyenne. It happened, on the night of July 4, that two valuable horses were stolen from the K 6 ranch, on Big Cow Creek, one of them, evidently as a clever ruse to ward off suspicion, a fine animal belonging to Brown himself, the man under arrest, who was employed on the place breaking horses. A trusted agent of the Wyoming Stock Growers' Association at once repaired to the place, upon learning the circumstances, and with his accustomed skill succeeded in unearthing one of the most brazen systems of rascality that this region has ever developed. It appears that on the night in question there was a dance at Cottonwood, a small hamlet a dozen miles north of K 6 ranch, to which festivity all the boys on the place, with the exception of Brown, betook themselves, by way of celebrating the day of national rejoicing. It was remarked at the time as somewhat singular that the horse trainer so persistently resisted all importunities to make one of the party, but 'business before pleasure' has evidently been a ruling principle with this young man.

Digitized by Google

A young lady residing on the place now testifies that she was awakened about midnight by certain mysterious sounds, and going to the window of her room, distinctly saw this fellow Brown making for the barns. Curious as to the errand that had taken him forth at such an hour, she sat by the window to wait his return, and thinks she must have fallen asleep, as the clock was striking three when she roused up to see Brown loitering under the trees in a strangely purposeless way. The girl's evidence, though given with reluctance, is positive and direct, while Brown admits being abroad at the hour named, although offering the flimsy explanation that while he started for the barns, he yet, for some caprice that he does not undertake to make clear, turned aside to gaze at the moon through the long hours unaccounted for. There seems little question that his views of the moon were taken from the back of his own good horse, which he had taken merely as a blind, while he rode forth to hand over to a confederate one of the most valuable little fillies in that part of Wyoming. Great excitement prevails over the arrest in Cheyenne, where the young man is very well known, having hitherto borne a good reputation, and startling developments are feared. The sheriff announces his determination to protect the prisoner at all haz-

Digitized by Google

ards, but the stockmen are all aroused over the losses that have been so exceptionally numerous of late, and it is rumoured upon the streets that a necktie social is an imminent possibility."

Edith seemed to become fairly benumbed with horror as she read. Gradually it occurred to her to note that it was a morning paper, while the communication from Cheyenne was dated the day before. Perhaps even now—"O God!" choking with the whispered cry. All the air seemed to have been suddenly exhausted from the room; she had an odd difficulty in breathing, and everything showed in a dull monochrome. What was it Mr. Cameron had said that day—"Better to be hung innocent than guilty"?

She knew too well the temper of the cattle men in respect to their losses to question that there might be short shrift for one condemned as a rustler, whoever he might be; she could even believe that their anger, turned against Paul Brown, might burn the more fiercely from the feeling that they had been so long befooled by a clever rogue. And he—ah! he had sworn to her—she had demanded the vow!—that he would never betray the secret of that night, come what would; and she knew that he would go down to his death, if need were, keeping his word.

Digitized by Google

Against the blurred background of rushing thought his face was clearly before her; that strong, resolute face, betraying in its every line the firmness of character which, nursed as a virtue, had developed in the line of obstinacy, perilously near to a vice. Once a resolution had assumed shape in the mind of such a man, his impulse would be to hold to it at whatever cost. And now it was she who had bound him to silence; she, whose lightest wish, as she well knew, would be to him a law; she, for whose sake his lips would be sealed as to the events of that night, even though she had never asked it. Her honour against his! Ah, the pity of it, the madness of it! To sacrifice his own good name, to let the world brand him as a horse thief, perchance even to lay down life itself, that nobody might know that she, Edith Ellery, had been with him at an unconventional hour, unchaperoned and alone. To pay such a price as this for that bauble thing, a reputation! How could he dream that she could ask it—could permit it? And to be here alone, tongue-tied and helpless, when a word might save him!

The soft frou-frou of silk swishing through the hall above called a poor, strained mask of composure to her face; and though her fingers fumbled clumsily over the task, they were yet swift to roll that fatal paper into smallest com-

Digitized by Google

pass, thrusting it under the pile of cushions at one side.

"Is your patience worn to tatters?" called out Mrs. Hallet, smilingly peeping over the banisters as she hurried down the stairs. "It was Paul—the adorable villain! Discipline must be maintained, you know; and when I insisted that he should stand in a corner for five long minutes, by way of impressing it upon his mind that my best hair brush is not to have its bristles clipped in furrows without trouble in store for the clipper—why, I simply had to stay and punish myself as well, in order to see that the sentence was properly executed. Ah, the influences of heredity—how we are punished for them! There can be no blinking the fact that I have been kept in corners of one sort and another most of my life for my own experimental tendency—I can't let the bristles alone! It is the most marked characteristic in that Pandora box of atavism belonging to our family; while I in turn have passed on the fatal impulse to poor little Paul. But it is scriptural and proper that the sins of the fathers—and mothers—should be visited upon the children, isn't it?" She had stopped at the bottom of the stairs, occupied with buttoning a glove, while she rattled on with that whimsical air she so often affected when her feelings were particularly

Digitized by Google

stirred. She adored her child; and to punish him in any degree was to bind with thorns the mother heart.

"Yes," returned Edith mechanically, her face as expressionless as though it had been carved in stone. The sins of the fathers—ah, how true it was! What was it but the crime of an unnatural father that had made Paul Brown an outcast from his home, now facing disgrace and death alone? Even the unyielding obstinacy that would face such chances undaunted, what was that but an inheritance from the grim old man whose will could not bend?

Mrs. Hallet stared surprisedly when at length her glance fell upon the girl. "Why, child, is it the light from the stained glass that makes you seem so—queered? Surely you are not ill!" hurrying to her with tender anxiety.

"Indeed, no; you must charge it to the stained glass," declared the girl, the pale lips bravely essaying a smile which at best was scarce more than a grimace. "I feel just a little done up, perhaps, but of course it is only the heat; or possibly I am beginning to be conscious of the altitude."

"Ah, the altitude—you have discovered what a convenient scapegoat it is for the burden of our megrims," laughed Mrs. Hallet, quite reassured. "I wonder what women fall back

Digitized by Google

upon in such emergencies in the East, where they have no altitude to speak of." She fancied that she had arrived at the root of the difficulty. The girl's feelings were doubtless harrowed with conviction of the pain she was about to inflict upon her lover. Doubtless she trembled, in innocent, girlish vanity, lest his life go all awreck because of that mighty "No." The romances of youth are such tragedies to the hearts that pant their way through the pitiful parts; such comedies to the eyes that look down from the grim heights of experience.

"Our glorious Colorado sunshine is the best possible antidote for all the ills of altitude," she gaily declared, when they were seated in the carriage. "And now, where shall we go? Have you any choice?"

"Would you mind driving to a telegraph office?" Edith asked eagerly, while a spot of red suddenly flamed on either pale cheek. A telegram to Cheyenne!—why, of course; why had she not thought of it before? It might not be too late to save him yet.

"To the telegraph office!" repeated Mrs. Hallet in a tone of laughing raillery. "Mercy me, child; don't tell me that you are going to do anything so hopelessly unromantic as to wire —*him!*"

"He is coming West on business, and want-

Digitized by Google

ed to meet me here," the girl hurriedly explained. "There would not be time for a letter."

"But in that case——" began the other, when something in Edith's look stopped the laughing protest, and she gave the coachman the order. "All the same," she could not resist adding in teasing tone, "I believe you are half repenting the decision already. Your expression is quite tragic."

"Oh, no," Edith exclaimed, with a sharp outburst of strained laughter. "It is not that I am repenting."

Her companion looked at her with a baffled sense of being, somehow, outside the situation; but, with that exquisite tact which always distinguished her, cleverly changed the subject. Curiosity was kindled by the girl's strange mood, which she meant should be explained to her; but it was one of her theories that success in small things, no less than in great, was worth the price of patience. And so she fell to chatting of indifferent subjects, occasionally calling attention to some building especially fine, or other object of interest as they passed; while Edith, mechanically responsive, in an undercurrent of thought was all absorbed in the second telegram she had to send, this time framing the phrases with no niggardly counting of words.

Digitized by Google

"Don't come with me, Barbara; it is not worth while," she exclaimed, as the carriage stopped before the Western Union office; and Mrs. Hallet, although she might have felt just a shade of pique at the evident desire to be rid of her, had yet the grace to smile as she settled herself acquiescently back against the cushions.

"And now, I suppose, the die is cast," she lightly observed, when the girl returned to the carriage.

"Ah, never say die!" A note of strange triumph was in the mirthless laughter that punctuated the speech. What would Barbara Hallet say could she know of the message that was flashing over the wires, addressed to Tom Tregent, of Cheyenne, saying, "Paul Brown is innocent of charges against him. I will be in Cheyenne by night train, prepared to prove it"?

And now to carry the promise of that telegram into effect. "Would you mind telling the man to drive to the Union Station?" she went on, trying to assume an air of off-hand carelessness, but faltering somewhat, her eyes falling. "I want"—moistening her dry lips nervously—"I want to ask about a train."

"A train!" repeated Mrs. Hallet, in what might seem excusable surprise. "Surely not the train by which this man may arrive from Bos-

Digitized by Google

ton. There are any number of trains from the East, you know."

"Oh, yes; but it is not that. It is only the Cheyenne train that I want to ask about. There is one that leaves at some time in the evening."

"And what of it?" cried the other bewilderedly. "Surely you are not thinking——"

"But I am, dear, and don't be vexed with me. I know it will seem to you whimsical, unreasonable, but—I want to go back to Wyoming —just for a few days." She realized acutely how strange this sudden purpose must appear, yet she was determined upon carrying out the plan without explanation. Some day she might tell what stress of circumstance had called her; but she knew too well the character of Barbara Hallet to dream that she would be allowed to go alone upon this errand were all made clear. And go alone she must. Dearly would she have liked the support of this clear-headed, practical friend in the unknown trials which lay before her; but, with a sickened heart, she remembered that there might be the publicity of a court room to face, lawyers and judges and officers galore; reporters, too, no doubt, with all the possible horrors of newspaper notoriety to come after; there might even be worse—ah, how could she forget that that awful "Special Correspondence" was dated yesterday; even now it might be that her com-

Digitized by Google

ing would be too late. She shut her pale lips together with a sort of fierceness to keep from crying aloud. Ah, no; Barbara must not come with her. It was for her, Edith Ellery, to do this errand alone; and should she weakly shrink and falter now, when he, for love of her, had not scrupled to face death itself with courage unquenchable?

"Go back to Wyoming!" repeated Mrs. Hallet, a hint of displeasure plainly mingling with surprise. "And why should you? Wire Nelsine to come down, if you want to consult with her; although, indeed, I thought you had already settled it to suit yourself. I urged you not to be hasty; but you would have it that you knew your own mind."

Edith had occasionally been put to confusion by her friend's quickness in jumping at a conclusion, but now there were thanks to Heaven in her heart for an opportune suggestion. "But Nelsine can not leave the children," she returned quickly. "It would be so much easier for me to go to her. And it is such a little journey, now that I know the way."

"But it is perfectly irrational."

"I know. But do you never have irrational impulses, Barbara?"

"Frequently, my child; it is all that saves me from madness, as vaccination wards off small-

Digitized by Google

pox. But this—it is beyond all reason. You are planning to go by this night train, I take it; to get into Cheyenne at nobody knows what uncanny hour—that rough, cowboy town."

"Oh, the town is beautifully civilized," the girl declared, trying hard to be calm, although her lips rebelliously trembled. "And it is the very train to take to get to the ranch comfortably, don't you know? One has the advantage of the early start for the long drive across the country."

"I have a good mind to go with you," announced the other, her face brightening with the idea. "I really feel that I ought to, if you will insist upon going. It seems dreadful to have you flying away off there into the wilderness, when they haven't been notified of your coming and can not be at the train to meet you. It would be delightful to surprise Nelsine, too. If it were not for Paul——"

"But you must not think of leaving him; why should you?" cried the girl, the protest sounding more candid than complimentary. "They did not meet me at the train before, but I had no trouble whatever. Indeed, there is not the slightest reason for your going."

"Nor for yours, so far as I can see—if you will pardon the frankness. Of course I am not presuming to dictate, however, but——"

Digitized by Google

"Oh, you don't know—you can't understand, and I can't explain!" the girl's lips now pitifully aquiver, and such pain in her eyes as reminded Barbara Hallet of some animal hurt to death. "I know I seem to you rude and ungrateful, but—I can not explain, dear—not until I come back. But I *must* go, and you must not try to stop me. It means more than my life, Barbara."

Digitized by Google

CHAPTER XX

His face turned impatiently toward that quarter whence presently the headlight of a locomotive would glow through the soft darkness of the summer night, Paul Brown loitered at the remote end of that long platform extending from the railway station at Cheyenne. The great gray stone building looked grim and repellent as a prison in the white flood of the electric light. Few were there to make welcome the coming, at this hour of half past one in the morning, while none were called to speed the parting guest, since the looked-for train was the local from Denver, which here would be at the end of its route. An empty baggage truck rumbled noisily across the wooden flooring to a place beside the outer track, the fellow supplying the propelling force, as though utterly worn out with the effort, adjusting himself to a seat on its gridiron surface, his legs drawn up to an angle of which the apex fairly met his chin, his hands clasped sustainingly around the bent knees. A couple of hotel porters leaned lazily against a corner of the building, "swapping lies," as they would have expressed it

Digitized by Google

in the slang that served them for wit; a man, seemingly not over-happy in anticipation of an arrival that had robbed him of good sleep, strode nervously up and down the platform; while by the door of the women's waiting room an express agent, his canvas-covered book clasped under one arm, loudly argued a question of local politics with a burly officer of the law, whose silver star gleamed in conspicuous warning to all whose thoughts might be of evil.

"Expectin' comp'ny, Brown?" called out the crouching fellow on the baggage truck, with sleepy interest; but the one addressed never heard him.

"She is coming! she is coming!" he was saying over and over in passionate recitative, to the accompaniment of his pulsing heart. Even with his hand fast closed upon the paper in his pocket, the telegram addressed to Tom Tregent, he could yet hardly believe that he was not dreaming. That she should be really coming—that he might within a brief span of minutes find himself holding her hand, looking into her eyes, hearing her voice—ah, blessings on that newspaper thunderbolt, erstwhile so accursed! It had won him a promise he had never dared to pray for.

And thus it was that when Edith Ellery stepped from the sleeper that night, glancing about with frightened eyes, it was Paul Brown's

Digitized by Google

glad face that she saw over the porter's shoulder, his hands that were stretched out to clasp hers in voiceless welcome. For the moment neither could speak.

"It is you—really you?" she gasped then, incredulously touching his sleeve with her finger tips. "You are not——"

"Decidedly not," he laughed, taking her bag from the porter's hand with an air of proprietorship. "Will you take my arm? It is hardly more than a dozen steps to the hotel, as you may remember, but I am obliged to take it rather slowly on account of my ankle, which has not quite recovered from the wrench of the other day. I hope you don't mind."

"But I don't understand," she faltered, bewilderedly. "I thought——"

"That you might find me hanging from a telegraph post?" He laughed in boyish abandon at the blankness of her look, at the same time, in daring tenderness, pressing the small hand closer to his side. "It was a shame that you had such a fright, but you must not expect me to be sorry, since it has brought you here."

"Then it was not true—what the paper said."

"It was and it wasn't. Artalissa did give me away, to the best of her ability. She evidently did see me from the window that night; and she

Digitized by Google

embroidered the tale with envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. She was loaded down with circumstantial evidence. She declared that she had heard the jingling of my spurs as I passed the house, the trampling of horses, and the opening of the corral gate a moment later; she even saw me twisting my quirt in my hands when I returned, fully three hours later, according to her guess—time enough, you will see, for me to have run the stock off to a confederate, as she suggested."

"But you did not wear spurs, you did not have a quirt, and it was not three hours," protested the girl breathlessly. "How could she say such things?"

"Oh, charge it to imagination. She probably did see me when I went up to the corral, while as to the rest——" He laughed, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"But she did not see me?"

"Thank Heaven, no! We can be certain of that, or her implacable viciousness would never have left you out of the tale."

"And you were not arrested?"

"But I was. There was nothing else to be done after her story, although to Tregent and your brother it was all a joke. I encouraged the farce partly to see how far the girl would go, and partly because I had planned to ride back to

Digitized by Google

town with Tregent the next day anyhow. I had, too, a hazy idea that if anybody on the place were in communication with the thief—one never knows what systems of underground telegraphy they have, these fellows—my arrest might put him a little off his guard. It was all a great bluff, so far as we were concerned; but the fellow who drove us in from the ranch improved the opportunity to get himself boiling drunk that night, when he went telling the tale around the saloons, with all sorts of boozy embellishments; then that little carrion crow of a reporter got hold of him, and—well, the joke had rather lost its point when the papers came in from Denver this afternoon. But I have seen the reporter since," laughing grimly, "and there will be the fullest possible retraction to-morrow. But you—were you so dreadfully frightened?"

"It was unspeakably horrible!" she declared, with a reminiscent shudder. "To think of you in such extremity, and that you might not prove your innocence by telling that I was with you that night."

"As if I could possibly have done such a thing! I would have died first," he protested warmly.

"I knew you would," she rejoined wearily, "and so—I had to come."

"And you would have stood up and given

Digitized by Google

such testimony for me?—have owned up before judge and jury, reporters, and the whole gossiping world, that you had been with your brother's hired man alone, at dead of night—that you had remained with him of your own accord for perhaps an hour? Indeed, Artalissa swore the time was three hours, you know; but that was only her amiable exaggeration. I was in luck that night, but not so lucky as that."

"Whatever the time, I should have sworn that I was with you every minute," she returned simply. "What else could I have done?"

"Oh, you—heroine!" he whispered, such passionate tenderness in the tone that the girl half withdrew her hand from his arm, trembling with shy apprehension. "To think what such an admission might have cost you!"

They had reached the hotel, and he led the way upstairs to the dimly lighted parlour, where a sleepy porter followed obsequiously. "The lady will go to her room presently. We will ring when we want you," he said to the fellow, mounting guard in the door until he saw him safely committed to the stairs. "I ought to have let you go at once," he said then, turning to the girl with a look of compunctious tenderness. "You are completely worn out, but I wanted to thank you for coming, and for that other time —that ride to Cameron's—brave little woman!

Digitized by Google

You do not know—I could not tell you—how much it meant to me."

"It was so little to do, when you had saved my life."

"And if I had—though that is putting it rather strongly—you took a thousand times as much pains to save mine. To think of your daring to take that long ride alone, and without knowing the way; it is a marvel that you could even have had the physical endurance; and that you could have done it for me! And now, again——"

"Again I find myself the heroine of another fiasco," she put in, with weary impatience. "You do not need me now any more than you did the doctor whom I brought that other time."

"Need you——" he impulsively repeated, with a sharp indrawn breath. "If you could only know——"

"What I should particularly like to know now is, at what time the first train leaves for Denver," she hurriedly interrupted.

"You don't mean the very first?" he faltered appealingly.

"Most certainly I do—the very first. You must see that the sooner I am away now the better. To be visiting you here in this unconventional way, with such long-tongued reporters as you have——"

Digitized by Google

"The reporters will let you alone," he put in grimly.

"But I must certainly be back under Mrs. Hallet's wing at the earliest possible moment."

"There is a train leaving here at 3.50," he reluctantly admitted. "But you are so tired——"

"I shall go back by that train, just the same," she declared, with a decisiveness that left nothing more to be said. "That will be in about two hours."

"A little less than two hours," his face clouded as he looked at his watch. She noticed now, for the first time, that he was clad in a light summer suit, fashioned after the style of other men's business wear, her eyes shyly approving the change. He had been a fine-looking fellow in the old corduroys which had grown so familiar; but now he looked every inch the gentleman her heart had held him to be. "If you are going so soon, I must not detain you any longer," he said regretfully. "You must go to your room and sleep, if you can. And, by the way, I ordered a little lunch sent up for you, thinking you might want it."

"It was kind of you, but I am not hungry; I supped full of horrors," smiling up at him with something of her old-time brightness, from the depths of the easy-chair in which she had set-

Digitized by Google

tled herself. "And I could not sleep; it is hardly worth while to lie down—if you don't mind keeping me company for the little while. I am so comfortable here."

"Well, no; I certainly don't mind staying," he returned, smiling broadly as he chose a chair near by. Was she not conscious of the exquisite absurdity of such words to him? "It is only too good of you to stay, and to let me."

"There are so many things that I want to have explained. About Artalissa, for instance; I can not see how she could have made up such a story. And to turn against you so, when she had seemed—well, friendly, to say the least."

"Oh, that," smiling embarrassedly, "as Kipling says, 'That is another story.' She had been more than kind, but—we had a few words. I was in a bad temper the morning you went away, without even a word of good-by. It was rather unkind of you—don't you think so?"

"Oh, possibly, if you felt it so," her eyes upon the handkerchief she was industriously drawing through one hand after the other. "But I would rather discuss Artalissa's behaviour now, if you don't object."

"Well, I was in an ugly frame of mind that day, as I said. Perhaps I had not quite the right kind of a feeling about it; very possibly I assumed too much; at any rate, it became fairly

Digitized by Google

maddening, the growing sense of obligation, with the obvious misunderstanding on her part—the expectation betrayed in a hundred ways that—— Oh, a man feels like a fool telling such things!" breaking off abruptly, a deep flush staining his sunburned face. "Don't ask me to go into details. It is enough to say that I felt that I ought to explain myself somewhat, and—I was a fool."

"You didn't tell her that you cared for—somebody else?" hastily exclaimed the girl, her face on the instant aflame for the unconsidered speech.

"No"—his heart throbbing wildly for the naïve recognition of his love. "I only tried to set myself right as to my attitude toward her. It was a bungling job, and—she hates like an Indian."

"But that hatred has cancelled the score of obligation. You owe her nothing now."

"I don't know. Debts of such sort are not easily wiped out. She may have saved my life, you know," his glance moodily following the pattern of the carpet. "Not that it was worth saving, or that I am particularly glad of it."

"Oh, if you are going to be pessimistic—— But what about the horses—have you any clew to them?"

"Kittery was arrested with my Black Prince over at Laramie this morning. I did not sup-

Digitized by Google

pose we could get hold of him so soon, although I felt sure he was the fellow we wanted. I believe, too, that it was Artalissa who put him up to the job—hoping it might get him off her hands for good and all. I may do her an injustice, but it seems to me she would hardly stick at anything to carry out a purpose, that girl."

"I should say not," Edith acrimoniously agreed.

"It seems that he had hobbled the filly outside the town while he rode in to get a bottle of whisky; and so, in all probability, she will yet be yours," he went on, his smile rather strained as he added, "I suppose, you know, that your brother planned to give her to you—a wedding present, I believe."

"Yes; he spoke of it; but now——"

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing; only my engagement—so far as it was an engagement—is broken. There will be no occasion for wedding presents," her glance falling confusedly. "And so, perhaps, the horse may not be mine, after all."

"Broken!"—fire in his eyes as he sprang impulsively toward her; but after a step he but turned to walk slowly to the window, where he drew aside the lace curtain, staring with wide-open, unseeing eyes into the street below. "What ought one to say upon such an occa-

Digitized by Google

sion?" he asked presently, in an odd, muffled tone. "Congratulations seem hardly in order."

"I don't know that there is occasion for remark of any sort," she rather tartly returned, adding, after a moment, with evident desire to change the subject: "To think of all these events occurring at K 6 ranch—the place where Mrs. Ellery always says that nothing ever happens."

"It is the place where everything happens," he exclaimed. "I have known some of the happiest hours of my life there—and some of the unhappiest."

"And when are you going back?"

"To K 6?—never. I shall leave the country." He came gloomily back from the window, once more seating himself beside her. "I am sick of the life, sick of the whole business. It is but dropping buckets into empty wells and growing old with drawing nothing up. There is nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for. I need a change, and opportunely I have been offered the management of an outfit in New Mexico. I shall go there as soon as I can arrange matters. But first I am going home to see the old father. You have made me feel that it is the thing to do."

"I am so glad! I have thought of it so much—so wished you would go."

"I know, dear little girl. It is so good of

Digitized by Google

you to care," all his heart speaking in the look he gave her. "But I have so hated the thought that I might seem to go back—begging. And then, how could I know—what reason have I even now to think the resurrection desirable from his point of view?"

"How can you say such a thing? How can you think it?" she urged in warm remonstrance. "It is only a sore and unreasoning pride of which you ought to be ashamed. You are vexed that you have not done great things to condone the past—those were your very words, I believe. As if love would stop to weigh and measure what you had gained in material things! Your father will be proud of you for what you are, and only too glad of his opportunity to condone the past."

"Will he?" he huskily whispered. She had taken off her gloves, and one bare hand lay tempting him, daring him, on the velvet-covered arm of her chair. He reached over impulsively, covering its rose-leaf daintiness with caressing pressure, his heart throbbing madly to note that it was not withdrawn. "How you comfort me, charm me, restore my faith, and make me glad in spite of myself! You make me forget what I am and what you are—everything but the happiness of being with you. It is as though we had a new world all to our-

Digitized by Google

selves. Did it enter your mind, when we were sitting there by the burned-out bonfire—at just about this hour of the night it was—did you guess that I was thinking such thoughts? Could you dream how hard it was for me to keep myself from snatching you to my heart and telling you that I could never let you go? You looked so lovely, so sweet, with the moonlight shining on your face—I wonder that I had strength to resist it."

"But you did!" she demurely murmured, a ravishing dimple deepening in one cheek.

"I did—then; but now——"

"Yes—and now?" she faltered softly, darting one swift glance at him, her face grown all a glowing pink.

"Now—I must try and not go mad!" he hoarsely exclaimed; adding in tense tone after an instant, "Do you know what it is—all that I have—to offer the woman I love? Can you imagine the life my wife would have, the bare emptiness of it, the sordid, pinching, vulgar poverty? I should love her as no woman was ever loved before, I think; yet how could love ask such a sacrifice?"

An irrepressible little laugh broke from the girl's lips. Evidently he did not dream of the little fortune that made poverty but an empty name for her—the money that had always sown

Digitized by Google

her mind with poisonous seeds of doubt and questioning when other loves had been offered her. At last distrust was utterly silenced. This man loved her for herself.

"Why do you laugh?" he demanded, almost with harshness. "Don't you know how you are tempting me?—how do you dare? Do you want me to tell you of my love—do I need to? And what have I to give you worth the taking? But you spoke of taking up a desert claim once, you know——" He faltered, with a nervous laugh that ended in a sob, as he bent his head to cover the little hand with passionate kisses. "Oh, darling! darling! what would you say if I should offer you one?"

"I think," she murmured, pausing judicially, a mischievous smile curving her lips, though a glint of happy tears shone in the soft, brown eyes, "all things considered, dear, I think I should accept it."

THE END

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

"A FRESH AND CHARMING NOVEL."

The Last Lady of Mulberry.

A Story of Italian New York. By HENRY WILTON THOMAS. Illustrated by Emil Pollak. 12mo. Cloth, $1.50.

"By far the most complete and satisfying description that has been given of life in the Italian quarter of New York. . . . Incidentally a very good novel, reasonable in its purpose and character drawing, intricate in plot, and dramatic in its action." —*Philadelphia Times.*

"A breezy book. It 'goes' from start to finish, and the action moves in a rich atmosphere, albeit that of the poorest of New York's alien colonies. . . . The best study of Italian life in New York, and of its special environment that has ever been drawn."—*New York Herald.*

"Through a very cleverly contrived course of events the complex life of the colony shines out in most resplendent proportions. . . . The story is an exceedingly clever piece of humorous writing."—*Pittsburg Chronicle-Telegraph.*

"The author has evidently made a close study of the Italian quarter and its people and customs, and has utilized his knowledge to best advantage."—*Denver Republican.*

"Character drawing and humor of an excellent quality."—*Rochester Herald.*

"Richly humorous, 'The Last Lady of Mulberry' is one of the most enjoyable little romances we have recently read. It presents a picture of the Little Italy known in all our larger cities in a way that is more effective than any number of serious dissertations."—*Providence News.*

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

Digitized by Google

By ELLEN THORNEYCROFT FOWLER.

JUST PUBLISHED.

The Farringdons.

A Novel. 12mo. Cloth, $1.50.

"A most readable story of the fortunes of several interesting people. . . . A plot that threads its way through the story reaches a conclusion the unexpectedness of which adds to the pleasure that the reader will find in this romance."—*Providence News.*

"Miss Fowler makes her own audience, which, large as it is in England, must be even larger in this country. There is a deeper note in this story than any she has yet sounded. . . . 'The Farringdons' is, above all else, a proclamation to the world that the religion which Christ brought to humanity is a living power, undiminished in strength, the mainspring of the actions and aspirations of millions of Anglo-Saxons."—*New York Mail and Express.*

"A book of intense interest."—*Springfield Union.*

"Its whole atmosphere is that of a June morning. . . . It is full of crisp and original dialogue, and beneath all the persiflage and gossip there is a strong undercurrent of wholesome and high-minded philosophy."—*Chicago Tribune.*

"Sparkling dialogue, careful character drawing, and admirable descriptions are all here, but above all we have real people, and real people who are interesting. The book is another evidence of the high abilities of the writer."—*Cincinnati Times-Star.*

Concerning Isabel Carnaby.

A Novel. New edition, with Portrait and Biographical Sketch of the Author. 12mo. Cloth, $1.50.

"No one who reads it will regret it or forget it."—*Chicago Tribune.*

"For brilliant conversations, epigrammatic bits of philosophy, keenness of wit, and full insight into human nature, 'Concerning Isabel Carnaby' is a remarkable success."—*Boston Transcript.*

"An excellent novel, clever and witty enough to be very amusing, and serious enough to provide much food for thought."—*London Daily Telegraph.*

A Double Thread.

A Novel. 12mo. Cloth, $1.50.

"The excellence of her writing makes . . . her book delightful reading. She is genial and sympathetic without being futile, and witty without being cynical."—*Literature, London.*

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

Digitized by Google

FOR NATURE LOVERS AND ANGLERS.

Familiar Fish: Their Habits and Capture.

A Practical Book on Fresh-Water Game Fish. By EUGENE MCCARTHY. With an Introduction by Dr. David Starr Jordan, President of Leland Stanford Junior University, and numerous Illustrations. 12mo. Cloth, $1.50.

This informing and practical book describes in a most interesting fashion the habits and environment of our familiar fresh-water game fish, including anadromous fish like the salmon and sea trout. The life of a fish is traced in a manner very interesting to Nature lovers, while the simple and useful explanations of the methods of angling for different fish will be appreciated by fishermen old and young. As one of the most experienced of American fishermen, Mr. McCarthy is able to speak with authority regarding salmon, trout, ouananiche, bass, pike, and pickerel, and other fish which are the object of the angler's pursuit. His clear and practical counsel as to fly-casting, and rods and tackle and their use, and his advice as to outfits and the various details of camp life, render his book a most useful companion for all sportsmen and campers. Dr. David Starr Jordan has read the manuscript, and has lent the weight of his approval by writing an introduction. The book is profusely illustrated with pictures and serviceable diagrams.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

Digitized by Google

FRANK M. CHAPMAN'S BOOKS.

Bird Studies with a Camera.

With Introductory Chapters on the Outfit and Methods of the Bird Photographer. By FRANK M. CHAPMAN, Assistant Curator of Vertebrate Zoology in the American Museum of Natural History; Author of "Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America" and "Bird-Life." Illustrated with over 100 Photographs from Nature by the Author. 12mo. Cloth, $1.75.

Bird students and photographers will find that this book possesses for them a unique interest and value. It contains fascinating accounts of the habits of some of our common birds and descriptions of the largest bird colonies existing in eastern North America; while its author's phenomenal success in photographing birds in Nature not only lends to the illustrations the charm of realism, but makes the book a record of surprising achievements with the camera. Several of these illustrations have been described by experts as "the most remarkable photographs of wild life we have ever seen." The book is practical as well as descriptive, and in the opening chapters the questions of camera, lens, plates, blinds, decoys, and other pertinent matters are fully discussed.

Bird-Life.

A Guide to the Study of our Common Birds. With 75 full-page uncolored plates and 25 drawings in the text, by ERNEST SETON THOMPSON. Library Edition. 12mo. Cloth, $1.75.

The Same, with lithographic plates in colors. 8vo. Cloth, $5.00.

TEACHERS' EDITION. Same as Library Edition, but containing an Appendix with new matter designed for the use of teachers, and including lists of birds for each month of the year. 12mo. Cloth, $2.00.

TEACHERS' MANUAL. To accompany Portfolios of Colored Plates of Bird-Life. Contains the same text as the Teachers' Edition of "Bird-Life," but is without the 75 uncolored plates. Sold only with the Portfolios, as follows:

Portfolio No. I.—Permanent Residents and Winter Visitants. 32 plates.

Portfolio No. II.—March and April Migrants. 34 plates.

Portfolio No. III.—May Migrants, Types of Birds' Eggs, Types of Birds' Nests from Photographs from Nature. 34 plates.

Price of Portfolios, each, $1.25; with Manual, $2.00. The three Portfolios with Manual, $4.00.

Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America.

With nearly 200 Illustrations. 12mo. Library Edition, cloth, $3.00; Pocket Edition, flexible morocco, $3.50.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY, NEW YORK.

Digitized by Google

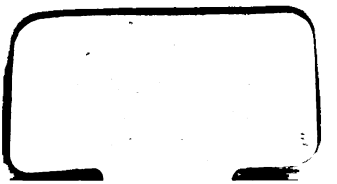
Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Gift of The People of the United States
Through the Victory Book Campaign
(A. L. A. — A. R. C. — U. S. O.)
To the Armed Forces and Merchant Marine



Digitized by Google